



Don't Forget Me: A Reddie fanfiction by TranquilGuardian

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Summary: Richie Tozier has had a crush on Eddie Kaspbrak since they were kids. Now that they're 18 and graduating high school, he's struggling with the idea of his first love moving away without knowing how he feels. And when Mike calls them back to Derry years later, he has no idea if Eddie remembers, or cares, about that summer after senior year. Or even if he remembers it fully himself.

1. The Fanny Pack

Richie's POV:

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, EDDIE!"

The six of us all grinned eagerly as Beverly, who was standing behind our smallest friend, removed her hands from his eyes. Her short red curls bobbed excitedly as she ran around in front of him so she could see his expression.

Eddie blinked against the bright light of Stan's synagogue's conference room, which was empty apart from us. Thankfully they'd let us use it, considering Stanley wasn't in the best of graces with them since his bar mitzvah several years back. Long story short, saying you're a loser and you "always fucking will be" in a religious facility doesn't earn you many brownie points with God.

He looked disgruntled at first from being blindly steered into the room by Beverly, until his gaze focused on the mini celebration we'd prepared. Stan had insisted we all don those ugly paper party hats, the kind with the elastic that dug into your chin. Never mind the fact that we were all about to graduate high school, he'd been so excited about them that none of us were able to protest for long.

He swiftly snapped a blue hat on to Eddie's own head as the birthday boy took in the scene before him. Plain vanilla cake, no frosting (fucking disgusting, but Eddie feared consuming too much sugar would rot his teeth), six messily newspaper wrapped presents, and a cheesing group of rag tag Losers met his eyes.

"You guys!" he smiled, running to hug each of us. He tackled Ben first, who'd organized the entire thing with Stanley's help, and Ben's face lit up.

"You really like it?" he asked nervously.

"Duh!" Eddie said, squeezing Stan next. The little sweater vest wearing dork hugged him back, looking proud of himself.

I pushed him away gently when he reached me, rolling my eyes. "None of that gay shit, Kaspbrak," I said. "Go blow out your candles."

He ignored my jab and rolled his eyes, turning to everyone as a whole. "Thank you so much, everyone." He saw the burning candles on the cake and quickly blew them out, staring down at his glorified loaf of bread. "You don't think any of the wax got on the cake, do you?" he asked worriedly, biting his lip. "I don't think you're supposed to eat the wax. Mom said paraffin wax causes cancer."

"I think y-you're good, Eddie," Bill laughed, picking up the knife sitting next to the cake on the conference table. "Let's eat."

I looked thoughtfully around at my friends while everyone stuffed their faces and chatted amongst themselves. The party wasn't much, but then again none of us could afford much. We'd busted our balls to get what we had and had almost gone bankrupt in the process. It wasn't much, but it had all the essentials. Except for balloons. None of those, for obvious reasons. Six and a half years later, and still none of us could stomach them.

Six and a half years. It was crazy how much we'd all changed. Eddie was the last of us to turn 18, and we'd all be graduating in a few months. Bev had finally hit puberty and looked like a girl now, which I think excited more than just Bill and Ben. Ben. Poor bastard. He still had it bad for her, but she and Bill had been casually dating for a couple years now. I say "casually" because they still hadn't fucked, according to Bill, but he swore he was okay with it.

Stan and Bill had both sprouted up like bean poles, and so had I, for that matter. I was the tallest Loser (and the most handsome). Ben was taller too, but his weight and round face still made him look about fifteen. Mike had stayed short and stocky, but the guy had some serious arms on him from so many years working on his grandpa's farm.

My face softened when I looked at Eddie. The scrawny little thing hadn't changed much over the years. Same mop of dark hair, same olive skin, and same stupid fucking inhaler. He really was my best friend though, and had been as far back as I could remember. All of the Losers were extremely close, but Eddie, Bill, Stan and I had been

friends since kindergarten. We'd even let Georgie tag along sometimes, when he was still around. Eddie and I had always kind of been stuck to each other, though. His mom had asked the teachers not to let him go outside for recess in kindergarten, because she feared his grass "allergy" would set off an asthma attack. I'd been the only kid to sit inside with him every day and color instead of going out to play. To be honest, I wasn't sure why he considered me his best friend, considering the amount of times I'd joked about having sex with his mother, but the little nerd liked me. Our friendship mainly revolved around me gently (and not so gently) bullying him, and him snapping back some smart kid bullshit. But it worked for us.

I knew we were all going our separate ways in just a few months, and it sucked donkey dong. Bev and her aunt were moving out West somewhere. Her aunt had gotten custody over her after she got the courage to go to the police about the way her dad treated her, and even though she was eighteen now, she still clung to the woman. Bill was going to school for writing in New York. Stanley was going to be part of some weird ass bird watching internship in South America. Ben just wanted to get the hell out of dodge, which was my plan, too. Eddie *and* his hypochondriac ass mother were moving to Ohio so he could go to pharmacy school.

I knew out of all my friends, not having Eddie around to mess with would be the hardest, though I'd never admit it to the little fucker. I hated the soft spot I had for him. I hated the way he made my heart beat out of my chest when his big brown eyes looked at me. I hated feeling different from my friends, who all openly expressed their attraction to women, and I tried to enthusiastically compensate with over the top sexual remarks to cover the things I wasn't feeling. I knew what happened to queers in little towns like mine. It disgusted me and I'd tried for years to force myself to get over my feelings for Eddie, but it was like a deep ache that wouldn't go away. I didn't fully understand it thought of him finding out terrified me. I'd been keeping this secret since I was twelve and I didn't plan on giving it up any time soon. Richie Trashmouth Tozier was not a fairy.

The thought of him going off into the world without us to protect him scared me, though. He was only 5'7, a far cry shorter than my gangly 6'2, which made him an easy target. Nothing overtly violent

like when we were kids, especially now that Henry Bowers' psychotic ass was locked up, but it was hateful just the same. It was so frustrating that he'd faced off against an actual killer clown when he was twelve but couldn't stand up to dumb ass high school bullies.

As I watched him neatly fold his napkin and start opening the presents as if he was trying not to rip any of the newspaper, I shook my head. Our Eds was one of a kind.

As I sat in my first period classroom, long legs stretched out into the aisle, Bill walked in with his backpack slung over one shoulder. He flopped down into the desk next to me and looked like he was holding back a smile. "Have you seen Eddie yet today?"

"Not yet, its 8 a.m.," I said, "It's not like I meet the kid in the bathroom before school for a blowjob. I have his mom for that."

Bill ignored my smart-ass remark, pulling his textbooks out and setting them on his desk. "J-just wait until he g-gets here."

As if on cue, Eddie came waltzing through the door, head held high. His confidence surprised me, and I wondered what had the little turd in such a good mood. Until I saw it.

The fanny pack.

It was bright red, as if it screamed "Hey! Beat me up! I'm a fucking wiener licking dork!"

I audibly groaned.

As Eddie sat down at the desk in front of me, his grin didn't waver. "Like it? It's the one Beverly bought me! It's just big enough for my inhaler, my Epi-pen, and my lactose pills, so it's perfect." He affectionately patted the bag sitting on his hip.

Bill's lips twitched, but he nodded. "It's g-great, Eddie," he said.

Well, I wasn't going to lie to him. "Eds, I say this because you're my friend. If you wear that fanny pack today, you're going to end up picking yourself up out of a trash can. God, I feel gayer just saying the words 'fanny pack'.

"It's not gay," he retorted defensively. "It's a hands-free method of carrying all of life's daily essentials, dickwad. It's cool."

I scratched my head, pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose with a sigh. "Don't say I didn't warn you, Poindexter."

Eddie gave me a cold look as the bell rang, turning around in his seat. Bill shrugged at me and I sighed again, resting my head against my hand and settling in for a boring lecture on the parts of a plant cell.

Clean clothes in hand, I padded barefoot down the row of showers in my swim trunks. P.E. had just ended, and I couldn't wait to shower off and get out of the wet bottoms. They were rubbing my balls all kinds of the wrong way. I'd pulled back the curtain to a stall when a sound from the last shower, where the locker room was only dimly lit, stopped me in my tracks.

"Richie," a voice hissed.

Instantly, my blood ran cold in my veins. Not again. The last time a voice had hissed my name from a shower drain, it had belonged to a fucking clown. I think all of us had a little bit of PTSD from our experiences that summer between seventh and eighth grade, and we'd discussed often getting nightmares or being extra jumpy at times, but this was next level. There was no way I was imagining this though, and if I was, I had bigger problems than wet ball chafe.

"Richie!" The voice sounded more insistent.

I took a couple steps back, trying to decide whether I needed to turn tail and run. I quickly scanned the room for a weapon, and unless you counted my magnum dong, I was out of luck.

Suddenly a mop of dark hair poked his head out from behind the shower curtain. I almost screamed before I realized who I was looking at.

"Eddie?" I blinked stupidly. Why was he in here? He had gym two periods before me. "Jesus Christ, Eds," I said, coming down from my adrenaline high. "You almost just got punched, I thought you were..."

anyway. What are you doing here?"

"Shut the fuck up and come here," Eddie whispered quickly, looking around. I stepped forward, and he pulled the curtain tighter closed around his neck. "They took my clothes," he said softly, looking away.

I felt myself instantly getting pissed and I tried to reign it in. "What do you mean they took your clothes, Eds? Who's 'they'? What happened?"

Eddie started talking quickly like he always did when he got worked up. "I just wanted to wash that disgusting chlorine off of me before I ended up with a chemical burn, you know how I have very sensitive skin, and so I threw my clothes and towel up over the top of the stall and lathered with my special soap and once I was rinsed off I reached for my towel and everything was gone," he said miserably.

I ignored the opportunity to make a remark about his 'special soap'. "You've been in here for two hours?" I asked incredulously.

He nodded sheepishly. "I knew you had gym fifth, so I figured my best bet was to wait it out. I tried to catch you before your class, but it was too loud, and you were talking to someone."

I took a deep breath. "Do you at least have your trunks?"

Eddie shook his head. "They took those too." His lower lip was quivering, and I hated the way that put a knot in my stomach.

"Stop," I said sharply. "No tears. Hang on." I stepped into the stall next to his, yanking the curtain closed. I stepped out of my trunks and wrung them out the best I could with my hands, then tossed them over the top to Eddie. "Here. These are better than nothing. I'm gonna get you out of here."

I could hear the distaste in Eddie's voice as I quickly dressed in my regular clothes, and I imagined the way he must be crinkling his nose. "These were on your wet ass for like an hour," he said.

"Are you kidding me right now?" I asked, zipping my pants and stepping out of the stall.

"Sorry, sorry," Eddie sighed, and a few seconds later he pulled the curtain back. If the situation hadn't been so serious, I would have laughed. The trunks hung down past his knees, and he held them up with one hand. "Don't you dare fucking laugh," he said, and that statement alone almost did me in. For someone so short, he was always so angry. "Now what?"

"I need you to hang out here for just a few more minutes," I said. I had been thinking of a plan while changing, and it was a plan one of the members of the Loser's Club was not going to like.

"What?! No, Richie, don't leave me," Eddie whined, looking like a spanked puppy.

"Trust me!" I said over my shoulder. I was already out the door.

I strode quickly through the halls to where I knew Stanley's sixth period had just started. He was the only one of us with a car, and I had to get Eds out of here to save him any more embarrassment. When I found out who'd done this to him...

"What? What are you gonna do, Trashmouth?" I asked myself sarcastically. "Insult them to death? Throw rocks at them like a middle schooler again?" When it came down to it, I didn't have the muscle to physically intimidate anyone.

When I reached Stanley's classroom, I started waving frantically through the glass pane in the door, trying to catch his attention. The fucking geek was studiously taking notes in his Calculus class like he wasn't about to go watch birds or some shit for a living.

He finally looked up when his neighbor saw me and nudged him, and I made a wild '*come here*' gesture. I watched him raise his hand, presumably to ask to use the restroom, and then he hurried into the hall and shut the door behind him. He made sure we were out of view from the inside of the classroom before turning to me. "What do you want, Richie?" he asked, sounding annoyed. "I need this class to graduate."

Well, there was no point in pussyfooting around. "I need your keys," I said.

"My keys," he repeated flatly. "Let me think about that. No."

"Eddie's stuck half naked in a locker room right now!" I said. "I have to take him home. Some dick took his stuff."

"Damn it, Eddie," Stan groaned, rubbing his forehead. "It's gotta be that fanny pack. I told him not to wear it to school. Poor kid can't catch a break. Rich, I can't just let you take my car, you don't even have your license."

"I drive my pop's truck all the time," I shrugged. "I can drive just fine." Okay, that was only half true, but a little white lie never hurt anybody.

"How am I supposed to get home?" he pressed doubtfully.

"My bike is out there, ride with the others. Just bring the bike by after school and you can pick up your car."

Stanley sighed, fishing his keys out of his khakis pocket and laying them in my outstretched hand. "Be careful. And be nice to him. It sounds like he's had a rough day."

"I'm always nice," I grinned, making Stanley scoff. But honestly, he didn't have to say anything to me. I could be a smartass, but nobody could ever say I wasn't there when my friends needed it. I tried to convince myself that was the only reason I wanted to comfort Eddie as I rushed out into the student parking lot to grab his bike and pull the car around.

Eddie's POV:

Richie scared the shit out me, flinging back the shower curtain of the stall I was hiding in. I yelped, putting a hand over my heart. "Jesus dude, don't do that."

He grinned down at me. "Someone's jumpy. Come on, Kaspbrak. The car's in the lot across the hall."

"You have Stan's car?!" I squeaked. "You can't even fucking drive!"

"Can one person not have faith in me?" Richie groaned, ushering me

out of the little stall. "You'll be fine, trust me. Come on, más rápido. I'm not trying to get caught."

"Wait!" I said, remembering something important. "My fanny pack!"

I heard Richie make what was probably a scathing comment under his breath, but I didn't care. I ran to my gym locker and flung it open.

The locker was empty.

"No!" I cried, horrified. "That was from Beverly! My medicine's in there!" I instantly started feeling my throat close up at the thought that I didn't have access to my inhaler, and my hand twitched instinctually towards the pocket of Richie's swim trunks.

"Keep it together," Richie said, grabbing my shoulder and steering me away. "That stuff can be replaced."

He poked his curly head into the hall first, and then gestured for me to follow him. I scurried to catch up, trying hard not to think about my bare feet on the filthy school floor.

There was a sound to our left, and then I saw Tom Gibson, one of the biggest assholes of our grade, grinning at me. "What's wrong, Wheezy? Can't find your clothes?" He pantomimed clutching his chest like he couldn't breathe.

I felt Richie stiffen beside me. "Oh, fuck off, you walking dildo," he spat. I sucked in air to fling my own insult at the big bully, but he put his arm around my shoulders and tried to keep us moving. "Nope, head forward, keep walking," he said insistently.

"Aw, I guess you need your little faggot boyfriend to protect you," Tom called after us with a mean laugh.

"Go blow your dad," I replied, and we pushed open the doors to the teacher's parking lot. I half expected him to come running out after us, but he didn't. He probably didn't think we were worth his time, which I was 100% okay with.

Richie took off walking quickly towards Stanley's car, his long legs leaving me in the dust. But I was looking warily down at the ground

with a frown.

"Are you coming or not, Eds?" Richie asked. He looked stressed and angry, but not at me. It seemed to have really bugged him the way that Tom had acted.

I squirmed, not wanting to anger him further but also really freaking the fuck out. "What if I step on a rock and cut my foot open? Or what if some crackhead left a needle in the lot and it gets stuck in my skin or something? My mom would never make it without me!"

Richie blinked at me. "After all these years, sometimes the things you say still make me think you're fucking with me. Listen, you need to come on. If a teacher sees us out here, our asses are grass."

I took a deep breath and hurried across the hot pavement to him, flinching at the sharp gravel in the bottoms of my feet. Richie opened his door and slid in, and I followed suit. I made sure I was securely buckled and glanced over at him. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" I asked.

He started the car and looked over his shoulder out the back windshield, but I saw that his hands were tight on the wheel. "Yeah, of course."

We slowly made our way out of the teacher's lot, and I think we both saw the clump of red fabric, torn open at all the seams, on the pavement at the same time. My stomach dropped. "My fanny pack," I whispered brokenly. "Stop the car!"

Richie sighed and braked, and I scrambled out of my seat to lift the poor destroyed bag from the ground. It was empty, so whoever had left it out here had taken all of my medicine too. My mom was going to kill me. I felt my eyes burning as I clutched the bag, and I turned around to climb back into the car.

"Hey, it's just a fanny pack, dweeb," Richie said in a strained voice, trying to lighten the mood.

Tears were stinging in my eyes as I buckled, though, and I looked away quickly. "It was a birthday present and I loved it," I mumbled.

I felt his long slender fingers tentatively on my wrist. "Hey," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "I'm sorry, okay? I'll buy you another one. Promise." I could tell he felt bad, but his concerned expression made me uncomfortable. Richie was my best friend, but he wasn't known for being particularly soft hearted. He was our comic relief.

"Let's just go," I said, sniffing angrily. "This day has been shit."

Richie nodded silently, no words for once in his life. He shifted the car into drive and pulled off the property.

Richie's POV:

All in all, I'd say I did a pretty good job getting us back to my place in one piece. (My place, because Mrs. K would lose her mind if she knew what had happened, and also because she didn't particularly like Eddie hanging out with me). I'd only gone up on a curb once, and I'd braked way too hard a few times, but by the way Eddie had acted you'd think I'd caused a major traffic pile up.

He climbed shakily out of the car, his face tinted slightly green, clutching the waistband of my too-large swim trunks in one hand and his destroyed fanny pack in the other. "I've never been more glad to have my feet back on the ground," he said.

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics and jogged ahead of him into the house, taking the stairs two at a time, and went into my room. I kicked the dirty underwear on my floor under the bed just in time for him to come in after me, panting. "No need to run," he complained. "Unless you're scared to be seen with me now."

I rolled my eyes. "Terrified," I said sarcastically, shoulder bumping him and leafing through my dresser for something that wouldn't swallow him up. I pulled out a long-sleeved blue shirt and a pair of gym shorts. "Here. Go get dressed, Eddie Spaghetti."

"Don't call me that," Eddie frowned, taking the clothes from me. I watched him walk into my attached bathroom and prayed I'd flushed the last time I'd used it.

I flopped down on my mattress waiting for him to come out, and I

thought about how sad it made me that the kid had had to spend two hours, naked and shivering, in a dirty ass shower stall. If it had been any of the other Losers, I'd have probably been able to make jokes about it, but it seriously pissed me off that Eddie had been subjected to that. He was weird, and he was small, so he was an easy target for the assholes at school.

He came out of the bathroom then, and I couldn't help the laugh that burst from my throat. The sleeves of the shirt came down and covered his hands, and the shirt itself almost hid his shorts, leaving just a head and two tanned legs exposed.

"Fuck off, Richie," he snapped, making me laugh harder. "Don't make fun of me." He crossed his arms over his chest, lower lip stuck slightly out.

I couldn't wipe the grin off my face. "No, no, Eds, it's really cute," I smiled.

We both froze then, and I wanted to fall through the floor. *It's cute? What the fuck, Richie?*

Eddie finally cleared his throat, looking away. "Don't be a homo," he said, his voice cracking slightly.

"Your mom could tell you I'm not a homo," I shot back immediately, but I could feel my ears burning and knew I must be red.

There was an uncomfortable beat of silence, and I turned my face away and ran my hands through my hair. "So uh, your bike's in the trunk by the way. You can hang out here and then ride home when school's supposed to be out, so your mom doesn't get too freaked. That is, uh, if you want to." Why the fuck was I being so weird?

"Yeah, yeah, right," Eddie said, looking down at his hands before he sat down on my bed next to me. "Thanks."

I jumped up like the mattress had scalded me. "Uh, I'm gonna go downstairs and get some water. Do you want some?"

"Sure," Eddie said with a crooked half-hearted smile, and I moved towards the door, shaking my head. Why hadn't Pennywise just

eaten me?

2. A Change of Clothes

Richie's POV:

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, the awkwardness from our interaction had finally faded somewhat. I think Eddie was trying hard to pretend it hadn't happened, to be honest. We had both settled on to my bed to play Playstation, and before I knew it, we were laughing and elbowing each other like usual.

"It feels weird that I'm skipping school," Eddie frowned, digging his hand down into the bag of chips that sat between us and popping one into his mouth.

I smiled down at him. "Look at you, being rebellious. But anyway, it's 3:40 now. School's technically out, so you're not skipping anymore." God forbid the little nerd miss a couple classes; his mom yanked him out for doctor's appointments every other week anyway.

He fidgeted and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. Thanks for having my back, Richie. Really."

I mirrored his shrug, trying to come off as nonchalant. "Losers gotta stick together, remember?"

"Right," he said. His smile seemed sad. I didn't blame him. He was picked on way more than any one of us and it had to be an exhausting way to live. I'd take it from him in a heartbeat if I could, but I wasn't about to tell him that. He looked up at me then, chewing the skin on his lip. "Have you thought about how things are gonna be after graduation?"

I sat the game controller next to me and nodded reluctantly. "Yeah. I think about it a lot to be honest." As much as I didn't want to, it was all I could think about. I wasn't anything without my friends. The longest any of us had been apart had been the summer of It. When Bill and I had fought, and Eddie's mother had kept him on lockdown from all of us. It was a miserable few weeks, and the thought that it would soon become a permanent reality made me sick.

"I don't want to not see everyone every day," he mumbled, looking down at his lap. "You guys are my only friends."

That made my heart hurt. "Yeah...I feel that. We'll all keep in contact though. We can call each other, and maybe hang out on holidays. You won't be rid of this handsome face for good," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

He didn't seem to notice. "What about once we have families of our own? Wives?" He frowned, and I could tell the thought bothered him.

I maneuvered the question carefully. The thought of Eddie growing up and falling in love did something to my stomach that I really didn't like. "Our kids will all be friends like we are," I replied. "Just wait, you'll see. Little carbon copies. Losers 2.0."

"Don't forget me, Richie," he said softly, and he sounded wise beyond his years.

I felt an ache in my throat, and I gave him a light shove. "Hey. Stop it. We've got two whole months before we have to deal with that. And I could never forget you Eds, you're like a recurring hemorrhoid."

He crinkled his nose. "That's disgusting." He opened his mouth like he was going to say something else, but at that moment I heard the familiar laughs of my friends and glanced out the window to see everyone dumping their bikes in my front yard.

"The guys are here," I said, and I watched them disappear under my window to the front door. I knew they'd let themselves in, since my pops worked all day. Maybe things would be a little easier with everyone there.

Five pairs of distinctive footsteps could be heard on the stairs, and then they entered the room, Bev leading the pack. Their hair was wind swept and they were laughing, but they quickly sobered up when they saw Eddie's morose expression.

"Are y-you okay, Eddie?" Bill asked, patting Eddie's knee. "S-Stan told us what happened."

"I'm fine," Eddie sighed, accepting the hug that Beverly was extending to him. "They destroyed your present, though, Beverly. I'm really sorry..." He looked like he was about to tear up.

Bev's smile was gentle. "Don't be sorry," she said. She dropped gracefully into a cross legged position on the carpet, leveling a serious look at him. "We do have to figure out a good way to get payback though."

Eddie shook his head. "I don't want payback. I just want to forget it. My mom is literally going to end my life anyway when I figure out how to explain the fact that all my medicine is gone. I don't want to come home with a black eye on top of it. I'm pretty sure it was Tom Gibson, and that dude is three of me."

I thought back to how Tom had mocked Eddie in the hallway and gritted my teeth. "I think we do need payback," I said, locking eyes with Beverly.

Mike looked up from where he'd been rolling his shoelace between his fingers. "I agree with Richie."

I saw Ben and Stanley shaking their heads vehemently. "We aren't little kids anymore, guys," Stan said. "We graduate in two months; I can't risk screwing up my career path over some dick at school."

"Oh, for fucks sake, Stanley, you're going bird watching for six months after graduation," I sighed. "Bill? You in?"

Before Bill could answer, Eddie spoke up. "I don't want you guys getting in trouble for me," he said firmly. "It's not worth it; we could all get in trouble, or beat up, and I couldn't live with myself if that happened." I could tell he was getting worked up, and without his inhaler I didn't need that.

"Okay, okay," I said, stretching out on my bed and letting it drop. I shook my head at Bev and Mike so that they didn't press the issue. We'd have never let this shit slide as kids, but I guess that was the point of growing up. My foot brushed against Eddie's upper thigh accidentally, and I watched him jerk.

He stood quickly and pushed the sleeves up on the shirt I'd lent him so that they weren't pooling over his hands. "I need to go home," he said in an odd tone. "I promised Mom I'd help her move the couch tonight."

"Move th-the couch?" Bill asked doubtfully.

Eddie laughed, sounding strained. "Yeah. We're, uh, rearranging the living room tonight. Ya know, so she can have a better view of Maury."

I looked down, feeling sick. He was making excuses to get away from me, and they weren't even good ones. He was that weirded out about me telling him he was cute earlier? I mean yeah, it had been an awkward slip up, but Stanley joked that Bill was cute all the time and things weren't weird between them. We'd been friends for a decade and a half, and he'd never acted scared to touch me. We'd slept in the same beds for sleepovers, hugged, leaned against each other...

He knows, a scathing voice in my head whispered.

No. Fuck that. He didn't know anything, because there wasn't anything to know.

"Hey, do you want me to ride home with you?" I asked, trying to convince myself that I was just being paranoid.

"No, it's okay, thanks though," Eddie said quickly, which stung. He really was acting disgusted by me then. He waved halfheartedly at all of us. "I'll see you guys at school tomorrow, okay?"

"Of course," Beverly said. "Are you sure you're okay, Eddie? You seem...I don't know. Pale."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good," he said. "Stan, can you come unlock your trunk for me? My bike's still in it." He turned quickly, stumbling against my nightstand and quickly steadying the lamp, before ducking out of the room.

Eddie's POV:

I pedaled hard back towards my house, trying to keep my breathing

steady so I didn't throw myself into an attack. Richie had to have noticed how I'd been acting. He had to have noticed the guilty look written all over my face. When he'd called me cute, something twinged inside of me that made my head spin. When he'd called me cute, it was like it was seventh grade all over again, and his hands were on my face forcing me to look into his eyes as Pennywise moved in to kill us. It was him whispering, "Eddie, look at me," as I clutched my broken arm, because he wanted the last thing I saw to be his face and not a monster. It was that absolute pure sense of peace, if only for a split second.

And then his face had turned red, and he'd looked away, and I knew I must have given something away in my expression. I knew he must've realized that I'd hoped for more than teasing in his remark. Seeing him clam up like he didn't know what to say, and knowing it was because he'd realized I cared for him in a way he would never be able to care for me, made me sick. I'd thought I'd pulled myself together until he brushed my leg, and our awkward interaction had come rushing back again. "Fuck," I groaned out loud, tightening my hands on the handlebars. I always fucked everything up. I couldn't keep a cool head under pressure. I didn't know how I felt about Richie, but I knew it was deeper than what I felt for Bill, or Stan, or Ben, or Mike, or Bev. It was different.

If I looked at those big dumb eyes for too long, or those curls, the veins in the back of his slender hands, I started to feel the stirrings of unease in my stomach. So I tried consistently to keep our friendship surface level, and even went out of my way to hang out with my other friends some days that I wanted to hang out with him so that I didn't appear too needy. I wasn't gay. I liked girls. But Richie's face did things to me. I knew if I didn't pull back on the reigns, hard, it was going to end very badly for me when I had to leave him.

I rode up in front of my house, and I carefully propped my bike up on its kickstand against the garage. I looked down at Richie's clothing on me and winced, praying I could make it up the stairs to my bedroom without attracting my mom's attention. I slowly opened the screen door and stepped inside, and I heard the television in the living room. I prayed its sound would mask my steps as I placed my foot on the bottom stair.

"Eddie Bear, is that you?" my mom called from her chair. "How was school, baby?"

Fuck.

"It was good, mama," I said, not making any move to come around the corner. "I have a lot of homework, though, so I'll be upstairs."

"Hold on honey, come here and give me a hug," my mom insisted. "I've missed you. You've been gone all day."

I gritted my teeth and stepped slowly into the living room, giving her a big smile. "I missed you too, mom." Maybe if I didn't bring any attention to it...?

My mom's brow furrowed immediately when she saw me. I should've known that I wouldn't escape her hyper focused gaze, considering it felt like she was waiting for me to fall apart or break every time she looked at me. "Those aren't your clothes, Eddie, they're absolutely swallowing you up. What happened to your clothes?"

I thought quickly. "I spilled ketchup all over my lap at lunch," I said, putting on my best exasperated expression. "I'm such a klutz. The nurse's office had some extra clothes they let me finish the day in."

My mom's eyes widened. "Eddie, you don't know what type of laundry soap those clothes have been washed in! They could give you an awful rash, you need to go upstairs and change right now. You should have called me. And put your clothes on the washing machine, I'll pretreat that stain for you."

"Of course, mama," I said, turning to go. "I'm sorry I didn't call you."

"I love you, Eddie," my mom said in a small voice. "You know that, right?"

"I love you too," I said quietly. I walked over and kissed her forehead. My mom was far from perfect. She was massively overprotective, she didn't like any of my friends, and growing up she had projected her health fears onto me to a point that I was terrified I was turning out just like her. But I knew she did love me. I think she was sick, sick in the head, maybe, and Stan always tried to remind me that I was my

own person and shouldn't take the things she said too seriously. My friends were great about being a buffer between my mom's indoctrination and my naivety.

Mom smiled at me from up in her chair and patted my arm. "You can go do your homework now, honey," she said. "And seriously. Change those clothes, dear. They smell funny."

I nodded and left the room, and on the way up the stairs I sniffed the front of the shirt. It didn't smell funny. It smelled like Richie, and that was comforting after the day I'd had. I sat on the edge of my bed, hugging my arms around myself and breathing in his woodsy aroma. It made me tingly. Before I knew it, I found myself putting my head on my pillow and closing my eyes. I breathed deeply, imagining that he was here. I imagined him looking at me with those big twinkling eyes of his, and I imagined being able to tell him just how deeply I cared for him without freaking him out. I imagined not having to leave him in two months and pretend that it wasn't going to be the hardest thing I'd had to do in my life. Above all, I imagined a happy life with my best friend by my side.

Richie's POV:

I walked side by side with Ben and Mike to lunch and pretended to listen to them talk about the Derry research they'd had to do for their history research projects. Usually I was the first one to jump in and start talking, but I didn't have a lot of words. Eddie had all but ignored me in first period that morning, even though he'd chatted with Bill just fine. I'd tried hard to get a conversation going with him before the bell, but between the one word replies and lack of eye contact, it was like talking to a brick wall.

"Hey Trashmouth, you good?" Mike asked. "You've been awful quiet over there."

I looked up, running a hand through my hair. "What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Just kinda tired today."

Mike seemed satisfied with that answer and launched back into his story, but I caught Ben watching me worriedly.

We went through the slow lunch line and I chewed my lip, sick to my stomach. Eddie knew something, or at least suspected it. And he was mad at me about it. That much was clear. Eds and I hadn't fought in years, not really. Now he was mad at me, for what? For acting like a homo? For making him uncomfortable? I couldn't blame him, but I didn't know how to approach it.

I absently put a slice of greasy looking pizza on my tray and fished a dollar out of my pocket for the lunch aid, and I walked with Ben and Mike to the table where the rest of our friends sat. My stomach knotted when I saw Eddie and how he was already sitting between Stan and Beverly. He met my eyes accidentally and then looked away quickly, appearing to be extremely interested in reading the side of his milk carton.

I sighed and flopped down into a chair across from him, trying to make him look at me. Trying to get him to understand. I kicked his leg gently under the table and he looked up on reflex. I didn't look away. I stared him down, trying to convey things through my eyes that I could never say out loud. How sorry I was, how I needed him to speak to me. How I needed my best friend.

To my surprise, Eddie didn't look away immediately either. His eyes were wide, but they weren't angry. Or disgusted. They looked... scared. He made a soft strangled noise and stood up, finally breaking eye contact.

Stan looked over from where was talking to the others. He looked concerned. "Where are you going, Eddie? Are you okay?"

"Bathroom," Eddie managed to gasp out, and started walking briskly towards the restrooms at the other end of the cafeteria.

The Losers all exchanged looks of worry before Bill turned to me. "Is he o-okay?" he asked.

"What? What do you mean? How should I know?" I asked, too quickly. I could feel sweat trickling down my neck and I wiped at it in annoyance.

Bill looked stunned. "Well...b-because you're his b-best friend. Are

you okay, R-Richie? You're pale."

"I'm fine," I said. I stood, just as quickly as Eddie had. "I'm gonna go check on him."

I walked slowly towards the restroom, feeling like I was headed into the lion's den. I didn't know what I was supposed to say. I didn't know if there was anything that I *could* say without coming clean.

When I first walked in, I thought it was empty. Had he managed to slip by me? There was no way; I'd taken the exact same path he had. I bent at the waist, looking under the row of stalls, and saw two white sneakers.

I sighed and walked over the that stall, knocking on it lightly. I still had no clue how I was going to apologize.

"Occupied," Eddie's hoarse voice replied, and I could tell immediately that he was crying.

I blinked in surprise. "Eddie, it's me. Open up."

"Go on back out, I'm fine. I'm just not feeling very well," Eddie replied. I heard him sniffing.

"Open the door or I'm coming under," I threatened, pulling on the door again. I shot a quick glance at the bathroom entrance, praying nobody else came in.

There was a moment of silence. "Don't crawl on this floor, Richie, that's disgusting."

I sighed, rubbing my eyes under my glasses. "Please, Eds. I really need to talk to you."

Eddie sniffled again, and then he slowly unlatched his door and pushed it open. His eyes were red and swollen, and he wadded up some toilet paper to dab at them in embarrassment.

"Hey now, don't cry," I groaned, my heart heavy. "I'm really sorry, Eddie."

Eddie looked up in genuine surprise. "What do you mean?"

I stared back at him blankly. "What do you mean what do I mean? I said something dumb yesterday and it made you uncomfortable, and I could tell you were mad at me. Now you're in here crying?"

An actual laugh burst from Eddie's throat and he wiped at his eyes again, this time with the back of his hand. "I'm not mad at you, Richie."

It broke my heart to see him cry. Without thinking, I raised my hand and wiped my thumb at the wetness on his cheek, and he shuddered into my touch and closed his eyes.

I pulled back quickly in embarrassment. Doing shit like that wasn't helping my case. "Yes, you are. It made you scared for me to touch you. Like you think I'm some homo or something. You've been avoiding me all day, you won't even talk to me."

Eddie's eyes were wide. "I've been avoiding you because I thought I'd made *you* uncomfortable."

"Why the fuck would you have made me uncomfortable?" I blurted.

"I thought... I don't know." His cheeks were pink.

My heart was racing but I forced myself to keep a neutral expression. I was reading too much into things. I was hoping for things that weren't possible. I needed to calm the fuck down before I ruined everything.

Eddie shook his head, looking conflicted like he wanted to say something. "Fuck, Richie," he finally sighed, burying his face in his hands.

I tugged on his wrists until he lowered them, making him look at me. "Hey. Eddie, you're worrying me. What's going on? You can talk to me about anything, you know that."

Eddie's tearful smile was sad. "No. No, I can't."

Eddie' POV:

I saw the frustration and confusion in Richie's eyes as he looked down at me, and I wanted more than anything to be able to tell him. I wanted him to know the confusing things I felt when I looked at him. But there was no way I could utter them. It was impossible to say those words out loud. I couldn't bear seeing the disgust in his face if I told him how deeply I cared for him. The thought made me instantly start crying again, and I saw Richie's helpless expression.

He stepped forward without warning and hugged me to him, crushing my face against the front of his shirt. I froze. Richie never hugged me, not willingly. I felt his arms go around me and I shakily hugged him back, feeling my knees go weak as I soaked his t-shirt. His voice rumbled in his chest against my ear and I couldn't decipher what emotion it conveyed. Sadness? Nervousness?

"Eds, we have to have a talk after school."

3. Tell Me No

Eddie's POV:

I followed Richie back to our friends, watching him carefully. From the way he'd acted in that bathroom, and by the way he was acting now, I could tell something big was on his mind. He gave me a sad smile when he caught me staring at him and bumped my foot with his under the table. When we got up to throw our trash away, he touched my arm.

"Will you come by my house for a few minutes tonight? I'd rather talk there." He glanced over at the rest of the Losers for a split second. "Less...ears."

Eyes wide, I nodded. What the fuck was going on? There'd never been anything that Richie was scared to say in front of the group. As a matter of fact, he was a chronic *over*-sharer, and that's partly where his "Trashmouth" nickname had come from. Yet here he was, acting like a scared blushing little boy.

"You're not dying, are you?" I blurted. I didn't know where that had come from, but it was the only thing that made sense as to why he was acting so strange. Mom would know how to help him; she had all the best doctors on speed dial...

Richie laughed dryly, taking one last swig from his bottled water before tossing it. "No. I'm not dying. But...I think that might be an easier conversation."

He left me in the dust then, his long legs carrying him out of the cafeteria. I stared after him stupidly. I didn't know what else he could possibly say we needed to talk about after my meltdown in the bathroom, because if he thought he was just going to get me to spill my guts about it, he was wrong. But he was acting so nervous, so unlike himself.

What if... I shut the thought down before it had a chance to fully form. Filling my head with useless fantasies would only make things worse. Richie had never in his life given any indication that he was attracted

to men. In fact, he was aggressively *not* attracted to men. If he wasn't making crude sarcastic comments about my mother, he was going on about other women. And anyway, there was no reason for that topic to even come up. That is, unless he had suspected what was going on with me already.

My head was throbbing from post-cry fatigue as I walked slowly to class, mind spinning with the hundreds of possibilities of what was to come.

Richie's POV:

When the final bell rang that day, I felt like I was going to vomit. Seeing Eddie break down in that bathroom, something clearly heavy on his mind, had given me a shot of adrenaline. Whether it was bravery or stupidity, I'd convinced myself for a second that I could get him to be open with me about what was hurting him if only I was open with him first. Now that adrenaline was gone, and I wanted nothing more than to stuff the words back in my mouth and take it all back. What the fuck was I supposed to tell him? That I liked dick? That was going to be the opposite of comforting to my male best friend. And anyway, was that even true? What I felt for him went so beyond anything sexual. I didn't even see anyone else. All I felt when I looked at Eddie was, well...love.

I allowed myself to think the word itself for the first time, letting it marinate in my mind, tasting it silently on my tongue, and an overwhelming rush of emotion hit me. I loved all my friends. But what Eddie Kaspbrak made me feel...that was not the same.

The L word was scary. Fuck, it was scary. The thought of telling him that I loved him seemed too daunting to bear. I remembered back clearly to the first moment that I'd realized I loved him, though I hadn't known what it was at the time. The original four of us, Stan, Bill, Eddie and I had all been riding our bikes around town. I'd been racing in circles around my friends, showing off in typical Richie Tozier fashion, and had tried to take too sharp of a turn. My wheel had locked and thrown me over the handlebars. My knees and elbows were bloody, and my glasses had cracked. Eddie had immediately jumped into action, ten-year-old Eddie, to make sure I was okay.

I'd sat on the edge of the curb while he pulled Band-Aids and antiseptic out of his bag, and he'd sprayed some shit that stung like hell on my knee. I think I'd cussed, or flinched or something, and without a second of hesitation Eddie had grabbed my hand and held it tight. I remembered clutching it like a life preserver. As I'd looked at his distorted face through my shattered glasses, and had seen him watching me with worry, something had hit me in the stomach that had made me go weak. No one had ever looked at me that way. No one had cared like that. Such a warm unfamiliar feeling had filled me that my ten-year-old brain had no way of comprehending it.

As I'd gotten older, it hadn't gone away. It only intensified. When I touched his warm skin, when I watched his lips while he talked. The way he stuck his tongue out slightly when he was concentrating hard. As I'd listened to Bill describe the way he felt when he looked at Beverly a couple years later, only then did it click inside me. And only then did I realize that I was really truly different. I'd stopped touching him. I'd stopped hugging him. I'd done anything I could to shove what made me different back down inside of me.

"Different," I scoffed out loud under my breath. That was one way to put it.

"What's different?" Beverly asked, making me jump. "You really shouldn't talk to yourself, Richie." I looked down to see the freckled girl grinning at me.

"And you shouldn't sneak up on people. You might get swatted like a bug one of these days," I frowned.

Beverly rolled her eyes. "Right. I think we're planning on going to Ben's, are you coming?"

"Eddie and I are actually gonna work on homework," I replied. I tried my best to sound nonchalant, but my voice cracked slightly on the last syllable.

Bev didn't seem to notice, and she shrugged. "Suit yourself. I think we're gonna head out; you guys be careful riding home." She ran ahead to catch up with Bill, who was waiting for her by the front doors of the school with Ben.

I saw Eddie come around the corner, and I waved him down. When he approached me I saw him watching me cautiously.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

Eddie shrugged, looking down. "I'll be okay. Are you ready?"

No.

"Yeah," I said. I shifted my backpack and glanced down at him as we started walking. To my surprise, he was also sneaking a peek at me.

"It's not polite to stare." I smiled tightly, trying to keep things light.

Eddie grunted, and I could tell that his mind was occupied.

You and me both, pal.

We didn't speak much as we walked to our bikes. I took a deep breath and gritted my teeth. "I just...I just need to ask a favor," I said quietly.

He looked up as he straddled his bike seat. "Anything," he stated earnestly.

"I need you to try to stay open minded," I said. It was pathetic how soft and pleading it came out. "I need you to not see me any different."

I watched something weird cross Eddie's face. Whatever passive demeanor he'd been trying to maintain, it disappeared for a split second and pure unadulterated joy replaced it. As quickly as it had appeared, however, it was gone, and a solemn expression took its place. "Of course, Richie," he replied.

I bit the inside of my lip and pushed off on my bike. We'd see how true that held up.

Eddie's POV:

As I rode beside Richie, my mind was going a million miles an hour. Maybe I was leaning too heavily into confirmation bias, but what he

had said reminded me deeply of other patterns from our childhood. He'd seen me crying in the bathroom and I'd said there was something I couldn't tell him. Then he'd decided we needed to talk?

I remembered back to second grade, and how embarrassed I'd been when my mom had forced me to bring a teddy bear to school to "hug if I got scared". I'd tried to keep it shoved in my backpack, especially after the other kids had started making fun of me. The next day he'd come to school with a teddy bear of his own and had proudly sat it next to him at his desk. He carried that teddy bear every day until I finally convinced my mom to let me leave "Mr. Teddy" at home.

Fast forward to fourth grade, I'd gotten lice. My mom shaved my head. I'd cried and begged her not to, but she was terrified to leave any hair for the bugs to cling to. Richie had been at my house the night it happened and had seen how devastated I was. The next day at school, he walked through the classroom door and all his dark curls were gone. It turns out he'd lied to his dad and said he'd gotten lice too so that he could get his head shaved to match mine.

And most recently, freshman year. The other Losers and I had been staying over at his house and everyone had been discussing their first kisses. I'd whispered through the darkness to Richie, long after everyone else had fallen asleep, that I hadn't been kissed yet. He'd been quiet for a second and I'd expected a sexual remark or comment about all the girls he'd slept with, but then he'd finally whispered, "Me either."

All of this led me to believe that if Richie thought he could make something easier on me by humiliating himself too, he was going to do it. But I didn't want that. I didn't want him to say things or come out with secrets just because he wanted me to feel better about my own problems. I frowned as we pulled into his driveway, and I saw that his hands were shaking when he opened the front door. There was silence as we climbed the stairs to his room and then he finally turned to look at me.

"I have to tell you something," he said firmly. His hands were clenched, knuckles white.

"No, you don't," I said, and I could tell that he was caught off guard

by that remark. "I don't want you telling me anything you don't really want me to know."

Richie shook his head. "It's not a matter of wanting to tell you or not, Eds," he sighed. I could tell that he was struggling big time. "I just... you leave in two months, and I owe it to you. I owe it to me."

I don't know why I did what I did next. I reached forward and took his hand like we were kids again, and I felt him start to pull away before he finally stopped resisting and leveled a look at me. "This is hard," he finally managed. "I'm sorry."

I nodded, waiting patiently. I could practically see the cogs turning in his brain and we stood there in silence for a good thirty seconds before he finally sighed and hung his head.

"I don't know how to say it. I can't...I can't make the words happen."

"Can I guess?" I asked softly.

He raised his head then, and his dark eyes warily met mine. "You can try."

Fuck it. Either I was going to be right or he was going to laugh at me. "Richie, are you gay?" I blurted.

Richie ripped his hand from mine like I'd burned him, and for a second I thought I'd gotten it wrong, horribly wrong. I thought I'd offended him, and that he was either going to snap off with a sarcastic sexual remark or worse, tell me to get out. I saw him open his mouth like he was going to say something, but then his shoulders visibly slumped. He went from the Richie I knew and loved to a gangly teenage boy who just looked young, and tired, and very, very scared. His nod was almost imperceptible, and he cast his eyes to the floor.

My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I wanted to grin and cheer and celebrate, but not while Richie looked so deflated. I stepped forward to hug him, but he pulled away and looked at me with guarded eyes.

"There's something else you have to know."

"Anything, Richie," I said breathlessly.

He gritted his teeth and I watched tears fill his eyes. He blinked them back in annoyance, swiping at his face. "I love you," he whispered, swallowing and taking a step back like he expected me to swing at him.

The room started swimming. Richie Tozier loved *me*? I opened my mouth to say something, sure this was a dream, and my throat immediately closed up.

Richie's POV:

I'd never been so scared. The only time comparable was when I'd run into the kitchen on Neibolt Street to see Eddie, arm twisted grotesquely, lying in a corner as the fucking clown breathed in his face. But that had been a different type of fear. That bone chilling fear had been for my friend. Fear for Eddie's life had consumed me. This fear was for myself, selfishly enough. I was terrified that he was going to be so angry that he'd never speak to me again. I was terrified he'd look at me with nothing but disgust. He was so scared of the AIDS epidemic, and it was no secret that everyone associated that with the fairies. Was I a fairy?

Eddie was staring at me silently with wide eyes, and I bit the inside of my lip. "I'm sorry, Eddie. Say something," I whispered. "Anything, please. You're killing me."

He continued with that annoying bug-eyed gaze, and I noticed then that he was wheezing. He pantomimed an inhaler as he put a hand on his chest and gasped for air, and then it hit me.

"Fuck—Shit! Eddie," I groaned, immediately kneeling to search through his backpack. I pour my heart out to the boy I've loved since I was a kid and he goes into an asthma attack?

Eddie immediately started shaking his head and waving his hands frantically, wheezing again. It was a hoarse guttural sound. Of course. His inhaler had been taken. Why hadn't the little fuck replaced it yet?

"Do you want me to call your mom?" I asked worriedly, pulling him

over to sit on the edge of my bed.

He sat down hard, shaking his head. He started taking short jerky breaths through his nose and pushing them out through his mouth. His eyes were closed, and his brow was furrowed. I sat by helplessly, the fact that I'd just said the hardest three words of my life not even on my mind anymore. He stood suddenly and shot into my bathroom, and I watched him turn the shower on as hot as it would go before sitting on the lid of the toilet and putting his head in his hands.

It seemed like eons passed as we sat in that steamy bathroom in silence, but in reality it was only a few minutes before his breathing started returning to normal. He raised his head to grin at me when he'd caught his breath, but his face was pale.

"What the fuck, Eds," I said in relief. "You scared the hell out of me. Listen, I'm sorry...I shouldn't have said anything, I should've kept my stupid mouth shut. I never imagined that would happen—"

"Shut the fuck up," he replied breathlessly (no pun intended), putting a hand on mine. He hesitated for a moment before it all came out in a rush of words that I barely caught. "Richie, I don't know what I am or what this means for me but the only thing I'm sure of in this world is you, and I know that I love you too." He grabbed me and hugged me hard, and I almost fell backwards from where I'd been kneeling next to the toilet.

"Are you fucking with me or are you being serious," I choked out, feeling like I was getting ready to stop breathing myself. I patted his back, trying to loosen his arms from my neck.

"I'm serious, Richie, I'm so serious," he whispered, his breath tickling my ear. I could almost see the wide smile in his voice. "You don't know how long I've struggled with how I feel about you. How long I've felt bad for it. And this whole time you felt the same."

I hugged him back with everything I had, breathing in his scent. "This doesn't even feel real," I managed. "I don't even know what to say."

I started to pull back, but Eddie wouldn't let go. "Not yet," he said stubbornly, and I laughed. I felt high. We were giggling like awkward

little schoolboys, and I think both of us were too scared to break the hug and look each other in the eye.

He hung on to me for a few more seconds before finally pulling back to look at me. His face was beet red, and I could feel the heat in my own cheeks as well. I mirrored his cheesy smile and looked down at the tile floor. "So, like...how long?" I finally managed.

"How long what?" Eddie asked.

I frowned at him, not sure if he was genuinely confused or if he was being cheeky on purpose to make me squirm. "How long have you, like...loved me?" The last two words came out weak, and I didn't know if I was ever going to get used to saying that.

Eddie was the one to squirm at that, clasping his hands in his lap. "I've known I felt differently about you than the other guys since we were kids. But I also knew I was attracted to women. I still don't know what that means for me; it's all so confusing. When I see you, I get a weird feeling low in my stomach, and I want to touch you. I don't want to touch anyone, but I want to touch you." He took my hands for emphasis, unashamedly meeting my eyes with his cheeks flaming.

I blinked, the stirrings of something unfamiliar in the pit of my own stomach when he said that. I swallowed hard and the tension in the air was palpable.

"I don't just mean, like...sexually," Eddie added lamely, seeing my expression. He practically whispered the last word even though we were alone. He bit his lip and looked away.

His fucking lips...

I cleared my throat abruptly, standing. "Let's get out of this hot ass bathroom," I said, reaching past the curtain to stop the flow of water. "I'm sweating my balls off."

Eddie jumped to his feet. "Yeah, yeah," he agreed, looking at his hands.

We slowly made our way back to my room. I snuck a look at him,

and he had that stupid cheesy grin on his face again. I bumped his shoulder, not able to help my own smile. "So," I said.

"So," Eddie replied, crossing his arms. "Are we like...supposed to...kiss?" He hissed the last word again like he had in the bathroom.

My expression softened. "Eds, nobody else is here," I said gently. "You don't have to whisper."

Eddie frowned. "Yeah, I know," he said. "It's just that it's like..."

"Taboo," I finished.

He nodded, looking sad. "I don't want it to be taboo," he said softly.

"I don't either," I replied, feeling my breathing pick up. I clenched and unclenched my fists, looking unwaveringly at him. A flurry of unfamiliar feelings and nerves filled me as I watched him lick his lips nervously, as I saw that gentle slope where his neck met his shoulder, as I eyed the curve of his jaw.

I wasn't attracted to women, but I had kissed a couple. Never as a relationship; my first kiss had been Mike's cousin during a game of Truth or Dare sophomore year. Her lips had molded against mine and I remembered her breath had smelled like citrus. I'd felt nothing. I could recall how offended she'd been when I'd maintained my neutral expression, simply pushing my glasses back up on my nose.

"What the hell, are you queer or something?" she'd scoffed. "Maybe that should be your next Truth. Are you queer, Tozier?"

I'd pantomimed gagging, rolling my eyes, but in the back of my mind I'd known after that day that I was done playing that game.

As I looked at Eddie now, and felt that unfamiliar heat pool in my stomach, I knew I had to kiss him. I had to kiss him right then; I needed it. I closed the space between us in two steps, raising a trembling hand to his cheek. I gave him time to pull away or tell me no, but his eyes were transfixed on mine and I felt him shaking slightly. His damp lips were parted slightly, and I saw his Adam's apple bob somewhat as he swallowed hard.

"Tell me no," I whispered, stroking my thumb across his lips.

"Yes," Eddie hissed stretching up on his toes and crushing his mouth to mine.

Eddie's POV:

The way Richie Tozier kissed me was not the way you saw in movies. It was not the self-assured graceful kiss that I'd seen demonstrated in movies like *Grease*. This kiss was clumsy, and nervous, and held a decade and a half's worth of pent up emotion. Our mouths fought for dominance for a second, but Richie easily won. I felt my arms go up around his neck, and I was astonished at my own confidence. His lips were warm and I noticed the slight scratch of his budding five o'clock shadow against my face. His fingers tangled into my short hair, and I could feel him shuddering needily into my touch. Too soon, he pulled back, leaving his forehead against mine for a moment. We were both breathing way too heavily for how short and innocent the kiss had been, and I knew that at least for me it was a mixture of nerves and hormones.

He finally pulled his face away, and his glasses were steamed up. He left one hand on my cheek, his smile radiant. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that, Eddie Kaspbrak," he murmured.

I struggled for words, unable to think. I finally settled for a nod. "Ditto," I managed, making him laugh.

"This conversation did not go at all like I thought it was going to," Richie chuckled, awkwardly running a hand through his hair. "Is it too late to say no homo?"

I nodded silently again, raising my fingers to my tingling lips. "Fuck," I finally breathed.

That really made him laugh. "Fuck is right," he agreed. "Come on, though. We're going on a walk."

I snapped out of my little trance, glaring at him for ruining the magic. "Where?"

"To the pharmacy," he replied firmly, pulling on my wrist. "We've

gotta get that dumbass inhaler replaced."

Notes:

Chapter three is finally out! I know it took longer than usual, but it's because I've rewritten this chapter three times now. It was such an important one to get right, and I'm extremely self critical of my writing. Please feel free to share this with your friends if you're enjoying it so far. Thank you for the views! Also,

DISCLAIMER: IF YOU ARE HAVING AN ASTHMA ATTACK AND DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR INHALER, PLEASE SEEK ACTUAL MEDICAL ATTENTION. I SIMPLY USED SOME HOME REMEDIES THAT HAVE WORKED FOR ME IN THE PAST IN THIS CHAPTER, BUT THEY ARE NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR A RESCUE INHALER.

4. Tension

Richie's POV:

That weekend, it was nearly impossible for me to keep my hands off of Eddie. All I wanted to do was kiss him; I swear I got high off of seeing his little pink cheeks and feeling his soft lips against mine. It was like I was making up for about twelve years of lost time, and I wasn't going to waste one more second of it. I did make sure things never went too far; I hadn't groped him or let things get heated, but simply allowing myself to *feel* was the most freeing thing I'd done in my life. Allowing myself to enjoy kissing the kid I loved, and not hating myself or being disgusted for having amorous thoughts about another male. Eddie returned those affections just as enthusiastically, which still blew my mind. I wasn't sure how this cute little fuck could actually be attracted to me. *Me*. The gangly four-eyed Trashmouth with pale skin and skinny arms. It was surreal.

We had to be careful and quiet together, because my pops was off work on the weekends, but that Saturday and Sunday had consisted of nothing but holding each other and exploring how good it felt to finally be able to touch. Each of his fingers, his cheeks, the nape of his neck. Touching him made me forget why I was ever ashamed of these feelings.

Eddie was currently laying his head against my shoulder as we watched *Jurassic Park*. It was Sunday night, and neither one of us wanted to go back to school the next day and pretend we weren't stupidly smitten again. He turned his face up to look at me, gently pressing his lips to my cheek, and I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

"I need to get going," he murmured, yawning. "It's dark. Mom's probably having an aneurism."

I groaned, wrapping my arms around him and shaking him gently. "No, you're kidnapped," I teased, but the sadness in my voice was clear. We had so little time left together. I hated the thought of having to be away from him again.

Eddie pulled out of my grasp with a frown. "Trust me, I don't want to go. I don't want to go to school tomorrow and back to the real world."

"Hey," I said, bumping his shoulder with my own. "This is our real world. This." I took his hand in my own, stroking my thumb across his palm.

He looked down. "Except no one can know."

"Would you want anyone to know?" I asked quietly.

I saw him hesitate for a moment before answering. "Life would be hard, Richie," he whispered. He untangled his legs from mine and knelt to pick his sneakers up off the floor. "I'd lose everyone. My mom would disown me."

I wasn't hurt. I actually agreed with him. Nothing would mean more to me than to be able to walk down the street holding Eddie's hand, but in a small town like Derry, that would be suicide.

I put my own shoes on. "Let me ride home with you."

Eddie smiled crookedly. "Okay, if you insist," he said. He gave me one last long hug, putting his forehead against mine. He pulled my glasses off and kissed each of my eyelids gently before kissing the tip of my nose, and then my lips. I smiled at his blurry form, pressing my lips against where his forehead appeared to be.

"Alright, give me my glasses," I complained, ruffling his hair. "I can't see shit."

Eddie giggled and danced away from me with them in his hands. "Fucking make me."

"You little shit," I groaned, reaching blindly forward. I could make out him skirting backwards, and it looked like he'd placed them on his own face.

"Oh my God, Richie, you're *really* blind," he said, sounding shocked.

"No shit. I don't wear them as a fashion statement. Or to pick up girls,

for that matter." I reached my hand out again. "Seriously Eds, hand 'em over."

Eddie stumbled forward in my glasses, tripping over the cords to my Playstation, and landed against me hard. I fell backwards, his body weight speeding up my momentum. I felt my head bash off the floor and saw stars for a minute.

"Fuck!" I yelled, reaching up to rub my head before realizing how we'd landed. Eddie was sprawled on top of me, his hands on the floor on either side of my shoulders. We were touching. A lot. My hormones stirred and I closed my eyes for a minute, waiting for him to roll off of me. *Keep it down, Tozier*, I pleaded to myself.

Eddie didn't move.

I opened one eye and saw him looking down at me, transfixed. He'd taken my glasses off and was watching me, and I was shocked at the unashamed smoldering lust burning in his eyes. I swallowed hard and shifted, and the movement resulted in friction that set my nerve endings alight.

Eddie jumped up suddenly, the spell broken. His lips were pressed tightly together. I took the glasses that he held out like a dead animal and stuffed them on my face. Sitting up, I smiled weakly at him. "Watch it," I said breathlessly.

"Well maybe if you didn't have to rely on echolocation to get around, I wouldn't have tripped," he snapped, but I saw that his cheeks were flaming.

I rubbed the sore spot on my head and stepped forward to wrap my arms around him, but he side stepped me. "Not a good idea right now," he managed, smiling in embarrassment.

I frowned and settled for kissing his forehead instead. "Sure it was an accident, Eddie Spaghetti? That felt like something out of a bad rom-com." I grinned at him.

He scowled back. "Yes, it was an accident," he said. "If I was coming on to you, I wouldn't have flailed and ended up with your kneecap in

my dick."

"Edward Kaspbrak, you watch your language!" I said, sounding falsely aghast. "That type of talk is not appropriate for my virgin ears."

"Right," he scoffed. He saw me rubbing my head again, and his expression shifted into one of worry. "You're not seeing spots or anything, are you?" he asked. "No blurry vision, confusion, nausea?"

"No," I laughed, making an effort to stop touching the spot so I didn't worry him. "I don't have a concussion."

Eddie bit his lip, but nodded. "If you're sure." I saw that his cheeks were still pink, and he was breathing a little faster than usual.

"You good?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

Eddie nodded, blushing harder. "Just...trying to calm down," he said.

I couldn't help myself. My eyes immediately lowered to the front of his jeans, and he yelped and turned away. "Stop it, don't undress me with your eyes," he hissed.

I swallowed hard. "I think it might be better for both of us if we get you home," I said.

We walked down the stairs wordlessly, and I groaned when I saw that it was pouring outside.

Pops was sitting back in his La-Z Boy watching tv, and he looked up at us. "Let me give you a ride home, Eddie," he said. "Your momma will have my neck if I let you ride home in this."

"That's okay, Mr. Tozier, you don't have to—" Eddie started, but my dad waved him down.

"I insist. Rich, go load his bike in the back of the pickup, will you?"

I nodded, locking eyes with Eddie before walking outside into the downpour. The sharp cold raindrops felt good against my flushed skin, and I heaved Eddie's bike into the bed of the truck before slamming the tailgate. Pops driving us home made me nervous,

because it was no secret that he was one of the town's alcoholics.

I poked my head back into the living room. "It's in," I said. Eddie scrambled over to me, and I turned to my dad. "We'll be in the truck," I said.

My dad heaved himself up from the chair, looking over his massive beer belly for his shoes. "Alright," he said absently.

I opened the truck door for Eddie when we got outside, and he crawled in the back seat. "Scooch," I said, swatting at him. He scooted over and gave me a look.

"You don't think your dad is going to think it's a little weird we're both sitting back here when there's a front seat open?" he asked.

I shrugged, the fact that we were both now in that confined space making me all too aware of my hormones. I glanced over and saw that the front door of the house was still shut. Pops always took a shit before he went anywhere, even just a few blocks down the road. I wasn't sure how he had that much shit to go around.

"Kiss me," I said, reaching for him. He only resisted a second before wrapping his fingers in my hair. He kissed me hungrily, with a sense of urgency we hadn't faced in the last two days of our whirlwind romance. I could tell he was still affected by our little slip upstairs, and, well, we were teenage boys after all.

Without thinking, I nipped at his bottom lip, and he didn't miss a beat as he opened his mouth to mine. Now we were *kissing*. I felt his tongue slip against my own, and suddenly my pants were too tight. Eddie sighed softly into my mouth and let out a low whining sound as I peppered kisses along his jawline and neck. I wanted him. I wanted him right then. I started sliding my hand down his chest, and he unconsciously shifted in his seat so that his legs were wider apart. Before my hand even reached his bellybutton though, I heard the front door to the house slam.

We jerked apart in terror, but thankfully my pops was still fiddling with the lock on the front door. I was breathing heavily, and so was Eddie. I swallowed in shock when I saw the bulge in his pants. I'd

done that to him. Me.

"Fuck, Richie," he whispered, shaking his inhaler and taking a deep hit off of it. My hands were shaking as I clenched my fists in my lap. I'd never done that before. I'd never been that physically intimate with anyone. And it had happened so quickly. I really needed to get a handle on my hormones.

My dad came around to the driver side of the truck, sitting down in his seat in front of Eddie. He turned back to look at us in confusion. "You boys okay?" he asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Eddie nodded quickly, a jerky motion. "Yes sir," he said, eyes round.

Pops raised his eyebrows and turned back around, putting the truck in gear. "All right then."

Eddie and I sat still as statues on the ride back to his house, occasionally stealing peeks at each other. What had happened tonight had undoubtedly been sexual. And I wasn't sure how to cope with that. I'd prided myself that what I felt for Eddie was beyond lust. I think I'd been stressing that to myself so much so that I didn't have to actually think I was *gay*, I just had romantic feelings for another man, not physical. But tonight...I'd wanted to do more to him than kiss. I was almost ashamed to even let myself think of the things I'd wanted to do. I knew it was only a matter of time before being around Eddie would lead to sex. And the thought both terrified and thrilled me.

Eddie's POV:

When Richie and his dad dropped me at my house, I gave Richie's hand one last discreet squeeze before sliding out of the truck. His dad helped me unload my bike and I waved to them as they drove off.

What the actual fuck had just happened?

Eddie, you virgin, you almost let him grab your dick, I thought in horror to myself. But the horror was mixed with fascination as well. I'd be lying to myself if I didn't admit all common sense had gone out the window the minute Richie bit my lip. I was putty in his hands. Oddly enough, I had no problem with him being the dominant one, even

though I talked big when we were around each other. I felt safe with Richie. He would never hurt me. But why the fuck had I acted like that? Like my body had a damn mind of its own?

I felt my cheeks heat up again at the memory, running my tongue across my lower lip. He'd been *hard*. And so had I. And I hadn't even cared that he'd seen. As I parked my bike against the garage and opened the front door, I managed to sneak past my mom, who was asleep in her chair. The way Richie had touched me...God. I stripped into my underwear for bed and crawled under the covers, tentatively touching my chest the way he had. I felt nothing as my own hand stroked down my stomach, but when it had been him...I closed my eyes and tried to relive it in my mind. Richie Tozier set me on fire the way no one ever had before.

Richie's POV:

The next day at school, it felt like all my friends knew. That was impossible, of course, but my paranoia was getting the better of me. I kept having to remind myself to breathe like *I* was the one with asthma.

We got our caps and gowns in our first period class, and Bill, Eddie and I all exchanged looks as the plastic wrapped folds of red fabric thunked on our desks. Graduation was looming on the horizon, and none of us knew when we'd see each other again after that. I peeled the sticky note that held my name off of my gown and wadded it up, flicking it at the back of Eddie's head.

He turned around with a glare, ready to unleash the fury of hell on me, but his expression softened at my grin. "Cut it out," he muttered.

I smiled innocently at him. "Whatever do you mean?"

He raised one eyebrow and picked up the sticky note, uncrumpling it and looking down at it. "I don't know, *Richard Wayne Tozier*, what do I mean?"

I snatched the paper back with a scowl. He knew I hated my full name. "Fuck off," I said.

"Y-you guys fight like an old m-married couple," Bill said, rolling his eyes and stuffing his gown in his backpack.

"No we don't," Eddie squeaked, voice about two octaves higher than usual. Jesus Christ, Kaspbrak, way to play it cool.

Bill gave him a funny look before opening his notebook for class. "Okay then?"

I let a tight hiss of air out through my teeth and stretched my legs out under Eddie's desk. This kid was gonna be the death of me.

Beverly was the last one of us to drop her tray on the lunch table. She looked excited. "Let's have a sleepover," she said. "All of us together. Like when we were kids. I'll get some booze."

"It's a school night," Eddie protested.

"Come on, Spaghetti, don't be a dork," Beverly said, reaching across the table and ruffling his hair. "It'll be fun. Remember when we were twelve? We'd all get sleeping bags and sleep on Bill's bedroom floor and watch scary movies."

"I also distinctly remember Richie drawing penises on my face when I fell asleep," Eddie retorted. "Every. Single. Time."

"You can't just fall asleep at 8:30 during a sleepover and not expect consequences," Mike grinned.

"My melatonin makes me tired," Eddie whined back.

Beverly rolled her eyes. "Whatever. So. How about it? My aunt is staying with her boyfriend tonight, so we have the house to ourselves."

Ben looked totally jazzed at the thought of staying the night with Bev. Poor bastard. "I'm down," he said.

Stan nodded. "I'll come. As long as I get to sleep in time for school tomorrow."

Bill gave Bev a sweet smile. "You know I-I'm in," he said, squeezing

her hand.

"A sleepover sounds great," Mike said, and I nodded in agreement.

"What about you, Eds?" Stan asked. "I'll make sure we get to sleep on time, I promise."

Eddie hesitated, but finally gave in with a small smile. "Alright."

"Awesome!" Bev grinned. "Rich, can you get ahold of some of your dad's stash? I got my hands on some, but I don't know if I'll have enough for all seven of us."

"Do you want me to die?" I asked. "Pops can sniff out alcohol a mile away. He'd notice if some was gone immediately."

Beverly frowned, but Stan surprised us all by speaking up. "I can get some wine from the synagogue," he said.

"Stan the Man!" I grinned, clapping him on the back. "I'm pretty sure that's blasphemous in about three different ways."

Stanley rolled his eyes. "I'm practically excommunicated anyway," he said.

I blinked at him. "Who are you and what have you done with Stanley Uris."

Stanley looked happy that he was being praised and took a bite of his pudding. "I'm growing."

Eddie squeezed my thigh under the table, making me jump. He looked innocently around, and it took everything I had not to open mouth stare at him. The little fuck continued to spoon peaches into his mouth like he hadn't done anything, but his left hand still rested on my thigh. I coughed, shifting away, and his hand followed me.

He left it there the remainder of lunch, a soft reminder that made eating hard. I was grateful when the bell rang and I could get away from him. I didn't want him to see the goosebumps on my skin. He didn't need to know just how much control he had over my body.

5. The Sleepover

Eddie's POV:

I stuffed pajamas and a change of clothes into my duffel bag and looked around my room, trying to think of what else I was forgetting. My inhaler was tucked safely in my pocket, and my other medicines were already in the handy little toiletry bag that Mom had bought me last Christmas. When I was satisfied that I had everything, I grabbed my pillow and took the stairs two at a time back down to the living room. Stanley was waiting outside in his car and already had Mike and Ben with him; he'd volunteered to drive us to Bev's house and to school the next day so that we didn't have to try to ride and carry everything at once. Of course, as far as my mom knew, it was Stan's house we were staying at. And Beverly wasn't invited.

I laughed to myself. Beverly was a sister to me. She was not the one my mom had to worry about. Sure, I noticed that she was attractive, we all had, but there was absolutely nothing anyone had to be concerned about.

"Eddie, if you decide you want to come home in the middle of the night, you ask Stanley or his parents to use their phone and you call me," Mom said worriedly, wrapping me in a hug. She kissed my forehead and made a worried sound in the back of her throat, like she was already picturing all the panic attacks I'd have without her up my ass all night.

"Of course, Momma." I nodded solemnly, fighting back an eye roll.

"Promise me you boys will go to school tomorrow too," she insisted. "And no one is drinking, right?"

"Nobody's drinking, and I promise I'll be at school," I said. Well, at least it was half true. I felt bad lying to my mom, but she'd never let me do anything unless I lied through my teeth about it.

Stan honked outside, and my mom's eyes narrowed. "If Stanley Uris wants to be impatient and disrespectful, he can forget it and you'll stay right here with me," she said. "I'm sure his father would agree

with me."

I winced. "No, Mom, please. Hey, I gotta go, okay? I love you." I kissed her cheek and ducked out the door before she could protest any more.

I walked quickly across the yard, dumping my bags in Stan's already popped trunk and closing it. I slid into the backseat next to Mike. "Did you have to honk, asshole?" I asked, reaching forward to shove his shoulder.

"It was an accident; there was a fly," Stan grinned. "Mrs. K didn't like that very much, I take it?"

"You could say that," I sighed. What did my mom like?

Vicks VapoRub. That's what she liked.

I stared out the window as we drove down the familiar streets towards Richie's house. The streets I'd memorized years ago as I'd flown on my bike to him, rain or shine. It had only been an hour or so, but I was excited to see his face. I was excited to spend the night with him.

I saw his head poke out of his upstairs window when we pulled up, and he held up a finger. I smiled at the sight of him. His dark curls that he'd always been so self-conscious about. His rumpled white tee shirt. His long nimble fingers. Every part of him was honestly like looking at art.

"What're you grinning at?" Mike asked, nudging me.

I jumped guiltily. "Uh. The neighbor's dog." I pointed at the retriever basking in the sun next door, and it seemed to satisfy Mike.

"Yeah, he's cute," Mike said.

I smiled to myself. *You have no idea, Hanlon.*

At that moment Richie came striding out his front door, already in a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a faded old Def Leppard shirt. He had a backpack slung over his shoulder, and he gestured for Stan to

pop the trunk. He tossed it in and slammed the lid, then opened the door to the backseat and smiled at me. "Scooch," he said, and I had a sudden jarring flashback to the night before in his dad's truck.

I scooted over into the middle seat to sit between him and Mike, my shoulders smashed between the two of them. I was the smallest, so it made sense, but it was still a tight fit.

"Alright, everybody buckled?" Stan asked, glancing in the rearview mirror. After a few mumbled 'yeah's, he put the car in gear and we peeled out.

The ride to Beverly's house consisted mostly of Mike and Richie both singing loudly along to the cassette in Stan's car, blasting my eardrums from both sides.

Africa by Toto came on after a rousing rendition of *Macarena*, which had been complete with the dance and elbows in my ribs, and Richie's face lit up. "This is my shit!" he crowed, slapping the back of Ben's headrest to the beat of the song. As the chorus neared, he looked over and sang directly to me. He managed to make it look silly and carefree, but it still made me warm to hear the words.

"It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from youuu! There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever dooo. I bless the rains down in Africaaa!" he sang in his loud offkey voice, grinning radiantly at me. His eyes were crinkled with happiness as he slapped the tops of his thighs to his words.

I couldn't help but grin back at him, both at the words of the song and at how happy and youthful he looked. It was like we were kids again. The wind from the rolled down window whipped through his hair, and he beamed from behind his dark curls. For a moment, it's like we weren't a secret. For a moment, as he sang to me, the rest of the car oblivious to the meaning behind his words, we were a normal teenage couple on a cruise, and I was being cheesily serenaded by my boyfriend.

The song cut off abruptly, and Richie scowled and faced Stan. "Hey!"

"We're getting close; I'm watching for my turn," Stan said absently,

hyper focused on the road.

"So silence helps you see better, does it, Professor?" Richie grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Stan ignored him, flicking his turn signal on and making his way into the quiet subdivision that Bev's aunt lived in. The nice houses we passed made me smile. Beverly had easily had the worst childhood of any of us, so it made me glad that she lived a comfortable life after getting away from her dad. If anyone deserved happiness, it was Bev.

We pulled in the driveway of the house, and Beverly, who was smoking a cigarette next to Bill on the front porch, her legs thrown across the wicker bench, jumped up to greet us. I waited for Richie to climb out and scrambled from the backseat, glad to have some room to breathe again.

"Aw, you're in your jammies, Richie?" Beverly asked, teasingly reaching to pinch his cheek.

"Yeah, figured they were easier to get off than jeans when I fuck your aunt," Richie said with an eye roll, slapping the trunk to remind Stan to pop the lid.

Beverly laughed. "You missed your chance, slick, she's already gone for the night," she said. "Did you bring the wine, Stan?"

Stanley looked around worriedly as he got out of his car, frowning at her. "Yeah, could you say it a little louder?"

I watched as Bev dropped her cigarette and crushed it under her boot before coming near me, which I was grateful for. She shoulder bumped me out of the way and grabbed the paper bags sitting in the trunk. "Well come on then, Losers," she said with a wicked smile. "Let's get drunk."

Beverly stacked out seven little glasses on her carpet, grinning mischievously at us all. "Shots," she said, eyes twinkling.

"Absolutely not," Stan said immediately, reaching into his paper bag for a bottle of wine. "I want to be able to function tomorrow."

"Don't be a pussy, Stan," Richie said, scooping up one of the empty glasses and holding it out to Bev. "I'm in."

I chewed my lip, looking at him. With his dad being an alcoholic, the thought of him drinking anything strong scared me. And we hadn't exactly drank anything like this before. Wine coolers every once in awhile were not the same thing.

He shot me a quick reassuring look as Beverly filled his glass, and he tipped it to his lips and threw his head back. He didn't even flinch.

"Anybody else?" Beverly asked, waving the bottle of whiskey enticingly.

I took a deep breath and snatched up a shot glass. "Me."

Richie's mouth popped open. "Maybe that's not a good idea, Eds," he said quickly.

Beverly grinned at him teasingly. "What is he, your boyfriend? Eds is a big boy." She poured a shot's worth of the amber liquid into my own glass.

Richie glowered at her. "He's probably fucking allergic to it or something anyway," he grumbled, but he snatched the bottle from her and poured himself another shot. "Cheers," he said, holding the glass out to me.

I hesitantly clinked my shot glass against his and without giving myself time to think, downed it in one swallow.

Instantly, searing heat burned my throat and made me wince. "Fuck," I managed, coughing. I could feel the heat making its way down my esophagus and into my stomach, and there was a bitter taste on the back of my tongue.

Richie grinned at me and threw back his own shot, making a satisfied smacking sound with his lips. "You don't drink whiskey for taste, Eds," he smiled.

Bill laughed and pulled the bottle away from Richie, filling his own glass, and Ben's. "B-b-bottoms up," he said, raising his glass and tilting

it to his mouth. He didn't make a face either, and I frowned, feeling shown up.

"Another," I said determinedly.

Bill handed me the bottle with a grin, and I poured my second shot. As I swallowed it, I focused hard on looking tough and manly, and my friends giggled at me when I couldn't help the crinkled nose that came with its intense taste.

Richie's cheeks were pink with the heat of the two shots he'd taken, and he swept his hair back off of his forehead. "Crack a window, will ya, Bev?" he complained. "Liquor makes me hot and if I'm going to get properly drunk, I don't want to be sweating like a pig."

I didn't want to admit it, but I was already feeling something myself. As the shots kept coming, and the inhibitions dropped, the Trashmouth came out.

"So, Bill," Richie asked after about an hour. He was laying on his back on the carpet, tossing a softball up into the air. "When are you and Marsh gonna fuck?" He lazily thrust his hips up at the ceiling, and I didn't like what that did to me.

Beverly instantly choked, glaring at him. "Beep Beep, Richie," she warned, but I saw her blush as she shot Bill a quick look.

"I'm just saying," Richie said nonchalantly. "I'll steal him some condoms. We don't need any Loser babies."

Bill threw a pillow at him, and it landed on his face with a comical thump. "K-knock it off."

Richie grabbed the pillow and tucked it behind his head with a grin. "Sorry. I might be a little tipsy." He closed one eye and pursed his lips, holding his thumb and index finger about an inch apart.

"You'll be cut off if you wanna keep talking about my sex life," Bev said, rolling her eyes.

"Or lack thereof, according to Big Bill," Richie said under his breath.

I gave him a disapproving look, and he smiled sheepishly at me.

My own vision was beginning to swim, but I didn't want to let him know. As long as I kept my mouth shut and didn't move too quickly, no one would know that I was getting too inebriated for my own good.

As if encouraging me, Stan, who had finally given in and started drinking whiskey with the rest of us, offered me the now mostly empty bottle. I shakily poured another shot. How many did that make now? Six? Seven? As I swallowed it down, I was aware that it didn't taste nearly as strong as it had in the beginning. That probably wasn't a good thing.

Bev stretched her long legs out into the center of the circle. "Remember the first time we ever drank together?" she asked with a giggle and a slight hiccup.

"Eddie almost had a coronary," Ben smiled.

"*Alcohol is poison!*" Mike said, imitating me fondly.

"We were thirteen," I frowned indignantly. "We should not have been drinking, I stand by that."

"We'd just defeated evil incarnate," Richie laughed. "That fucking clown took a bite out of Stan and nearly killed all of us. I think we deserved some wine coolers."

The circle fell silent, and I saw Stan run his fingers over the faint scars near his hairline.

"I d-don't want to talk about the clown," Bill said quietly.

Richie rolled over on his stomach, facing him. "Why? Why are we still letting this thing rule our lives? It's dead. It's not coming back, we kicked Its ass. You know we probably all have massive issues from this, right? Because we never talked about it? Not to each other, not to anyone."

"I don't w-w-want to t-talk about the f-f-fucking clown!" Bill said again, clenching his fists against his thighs. His stutter got worse

when he was worked up, and I could tell things were about to get heated if Richie didn't shut his drunk mouth.

"Richie," I said quietly, noticing that his name came out slightly slurred. "Chill, okay?"

Richie sighed, but let it drop. To be fair, I didn't really want to talk about it either. Pennywise had haunted my dreams for years. The clown. The leper. Bev getting kidnapped. Breaking my arm. Feeling his hot rancid breath in my face that day at Neibolt as he'd drooled on me. I'd tried to repress it, because it was easier than reliving any of it. But I was never free of It. Any time I saw a red balloon, any time I rode my bike past Neibolt, any time a kid went missing. Any small coincidence and it was like I was reliving it all over again. Richie was right, we probably did have PTSD or something. But the thought of talking about it made me sick.

Or honestly, maybe it was my blood alcohol content.

Richie's POV:

We all continued to drink as the night went on. Bev turned on *Misery*, the new Kathy Bates movie based on a Stephen King book, and we finished off the bottle of whiskey then moved on to Stan's dad's wine. Eddie sat next to me while the movie was on, close but still far enough away not to raise suspicion. The amount of alcohol he'd consumed made me nervous, because Eddie was not a drinker and he was the smallest one of us. When it hit him fully, it was going to hit hard.

Several of the Losers passed out in their sleeping bags during the movie. Mike and Ben both were snoring softly before it was an hour in, and I saw Bev, up in her bed with Bill, fading fast by the time Paul Sheldon was trying to make his great escape.

Eddie stood suddenly, staggering, and made a beeline for the bathroom down the hall. He'd gotten up to pee two or three times by that point, which is why you never piss while drinking, but the little dork hadn't listened to us.

I glanced up at Bill and saw that he was rolled over away from the

television, spooning with Bev like a dweeb. One foot hung over the edge of her small twin bed.

The credits rolled on the movie, and I leaned across Mike's sleeping body to poke Stanley. "Hey, hit the lights, will ya?"

He looked up from his book in surprise. "Yeah. You guys going to sleep?"

"I plan on trying," I yawned. "I think Eds is peeing again."

Stanley nodded, reaching up and flipping the light switch. He closed his book and rolled over to face the wall. "Night, Rich."

"Night, man," I whispered back. I settled into my own sleeping bag, the only sounds in the room the deep slow breathing of my friends. It was only when I tried to close my eyes did I realize how intoxicated I was. My head immediately began spinning and I groaned.

"Me too," Stan said into the darkness, and I grinned. He'd guessed immediately what was up.

I waited for Eddie for about ten more minutes before I began to get worried. Making sure Stan had already dozed off, I stood up slowly and tiptoed over the other Losers into the hallway. Once I was out of the room, I put one hand on the wall to steady myself and chuckled. I was drunk, alright. And I was feeling it.

I walked through the big shadowy house to the bathroom door. I saw the thin sliver of light that told me Eddie was still in there, and I frowned. "You good, punk?" I hissed.

He didn't answer.

I tried the doorknob and it wasn't locked. What I saw when I walked in made me blink in surprise.

Eddie was on his knees in front of the toilet, his head firmly planted over the bowl. The floor creaked and he jumped, slamming the lid and flushing quickly. "Hi," he said, trying to smile like nothing was wrong.

"It came back up, did it?" I asked.

"I'm fine, Richie," he insisted, but he was still slurring his words heavily. He wiped his mouth with a wad of toilet paper and tossed it under the lid.

I came and sat down on the bathroom floor next to him, running a hand through his hair gently so that it stood on end. It was damp with sweat. "Hey, it happens to the best of us," I said, leaning forward to kiss his forehead. It was the first time I'd been able to show him affection all day, and he leaned into it.

"I don't feel good," he finally admitted, hands still gripping the sides of the toilet. "My stomach hurts. My head is swimming."

"C'mere," I said, pulling him against me. He tucked his head into the crook of my neck and groaned.

"I love you," I said softly. My own head was spinning, and I rested it against his wearily. I was getting too old for this drinking shit.

"I love you too," Eddie said. We rested like that for a few minutes, and my eyes were getting heavy when he spoke again. What he said immediately woke me up, though.

"Richie, I'm horny," he said abruptly. His tone was completely serious. "I want you."

I choked on my own spit, jerking back to stare at him. "Eds, you're getting diarrhea of the mouth," I said nervously. "You're drunk."

Eddie grinned stupidly and he reached forward for the hem of my tee shirt. "Very drunk. Don't care. I want you, Richie. Now. I want to do it." He punctuated the last word with a hiccup and fumbled at my shirt, pulling it up as far as he could manage without me lifting my arms.

Eddie Kaspbrak had just looked at me and told me he wanted to fuck.

I sighed. It took all my willpower, but I shifted away from him and took his hands in my own. "No."

Real hurt showed in his eyes then, and he pushed his lower lip out like he was going to cry. "You don't...want me?" He pulled his hands away from me and lifted the lid to the toilet like he was about to be sick again.

I groaned. How long had I secretly fantasized about this? And now I was pushing him away because I had to be a stupid fucking good person. If there was one thing my dad had drilled into me, it was that you never had sex with a drunk girl. I figured the same rules applied.

"Of course, I want you," I whispered, fixing my shirt and putting a hand on his knee. "Eddie...you have no idea how bad I want you, damn it. But you're so drunk you can barely stand up. You'd never want to have sex on a dirty bathroom floor; in fact, if you were sober, we wouldn't even be sitting here right now. You don't know what you're saying. I'd never take advantage of you like that. I want you to be able to remember our first time, sweetheart. And also...your breath kinda smells like puke."

I stood up, swaying slightly, and pulled Eddie to his feet. "Come wash your face and rinse your mouth out," I said gently.

Eddie glowered at me but did as he was told. He splashed some cold water on his face from the marble sink, then cupped his hands under the flow and swished some in his mouth.

"Let's go to bed, okay? We can talk about this in the morning," I said. I was trying hard to act like the love of my life hadn't just propositioned me for sex, and had I been a man of lower character, I could've been losing my virginity tonight. Instead I'd be going to sleep drunk and sexually frustrated and very much still a virgin.

I knew that while it was Eddie standing in front of me, those words hadn't really been him. Eddie would've died of embarrassment before he said anything like that. And he sure as hell wouldn't have said he wanted to do it on the bathroom floor of Bev's aunt's house.

I took his hand and guided him back to Beverly's bedroom, but made sure to let go of him before we reached the doorway. It pained me to do that.

"I can't see," Eddie whispered, right before he tripped over Stan and face planted into the carpet. "Shit—Fuck!"

Stanley woke with a start and a cry of surprise and swung blindly at Eddie. "Watch where you're walking!"

Eddie put his face down close to Stan's so that his lips were near his ear. "Fucking fight me, assface," he slurred drunkenly.

"Alright, we're laying down," I hissed, grabbing his wrist and carefully (as carefully as I could) maneuvering us around the five bodies.

He slowly sank to the floor when he reached his sleeping bag, and I could just make out his shadowy form as he rolled over to face me. I glanced over at Stan, who'd rolled back away from us, and slid my hand out from under my blanket to squeeze his. Three times. *I love you.*

He squeezed mine back three times and made a loud adorable yawning noise, snuggling down until only his nose and eyes were above his blanket.

I didn't mean to fall asleep holding his hand, but the soft deep breathing of my friends lulled me into a drunken dreamless sleep.

Ben's POV:

I woke up at about 5 in the morning, only an hour before we had to get up for school. The sun was just barely seeping through the window of Bev's room, casting a soft golden light against her bed.

I swallowed hard at the sight. Her lips were parted slightly and the splash of freckles across her nose could be seen even in the dim light. Her short red curls were a stark contrast to her white pillowcase. *January embers...*

My friends knew that I loved Beverly. I had since we were children. To be honest, I think everyone knew but her. And Bill was one of my best friends, which made the situation even harder. My feelings had only grown as we'd gotten older, which made it harder to see her with him every year. Like now, the way she was curled against his side. It made me sick to my stomach. I just wanted Beverly to be

happy, and I knew she was happy with Bill, but in the back of my mind I just wished she could be happy with me instead.

I sat up with a soft sigh and glanced next to me at Mike. He was out cold and had his blanket pulled up over his head. It had probably been his loud snores that had woken me up in the first place, but I didn't mind. The quiet morning hours were the best time to think. It was so peaceful. I was glad that my friends were sleeping well.

I stretched my legs and immediately jumped back guiltily when I felt my foot brush the top of Richie's curly head. This room really was too small for seven people; we weren't four foot tall anymore.

I squinted through the shadows to make sure I hadn't woken him up, and what I saw shocked me.

He was curled tightly against Eddie's back, one arm thrown loosely over his waist. His face was buried in the back of Eddie's neck. One of Eddie's calves were slightly behind his body and was being held between Richie's knees.

I didn't know how to react. I would have never in a million years assumed Richie liked men. Eddie was another story, but Richie? To my own surprise, I wasn't concerned with judging them. Gays were heavily looked down on, but these were my best friends. All I could think about was whether it would be easier to pretend I hadn't seen and risk another Loser finding them like that, or bite the bullet and wake them up. I knew it would embarrass them, but it would embarrass them more for everyone else to see it at the same time. I wanted to believe that all of my friends would be kind about it, but I couldn't guarantee that for them.

I bit my lip and looked around at everyone else. They were all clearly deep asleep. Leaning forward, I gently shook Richie's shoulder. "Rich," I whispered.

Richie squirmed away from my touch with a groan but other than that didn't react.

"Richie," I said, shaking him more insistently.

"Hmm," he replied softly, not opening his eyes.

"Richie, you need to get off of him. I don't want you guys getting caught," I said, my heart hurting that I had no idea how long they'd felt like they had to keep this a secret from us.

At that, Richie's eyes snapped open, and he realized how he was laying. He jerked back in terror, stuttering incoherently as he met my eyes. His own eyes were large and filled with fear. "Ben," he whispered, sitting straight up. His curls stuck flat to one side of his head. "Please."

6. Three Weeks

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS ADULT CONTENT. PLEASE SKIP IF YOU ARE UNDER 18.

Richie's POV:

"Ben, please," I whispered. It felt like my heart had stopped; I couldn't breathe. My head was pounding, and my stomach was woozy from the hangover that was already blooming, but the sheer panic in my mind made all of that take the backseat.

Ben's eyes were guarded as he looked back at me. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

I could've collapsed in relief. I glanced around the room, making sure everyone was still unconscious. "I'm still me, okay? I'm still Richie." I fumbled for my glasses, feeling blindly around me on the carpet and putting them on. Seeing his expression in high definition made me even more anxious, because it was completely unreadable. "I'm still Richie," I repeated for emphasis.

Ben nodded hesitantly, looking across me at Eddie. "How long?" he asked simply.

"Not long," I said quietly, following his gaze to the comatose kid. He was sleeping hard, and he had thrown his blanket off. He had one sock on, one sock nowhere to be found. "It just kind of happened, ya know? He...he makes me happy."

Ben furrowed his brow, looking like he was struggling for words. I felt about an inch tall. Of course this was hard for him to wrap his mind around; gays weren't accepted in Derry. At all.

"I'm glad you're happy, Richie," he finally whispered. "You deserve to be happy."

"Thanks, Ben," I whispered back. "You do too, buddy." I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as I slid back down flat, staring at the ceiling. I was careful not to touch Eddie at all.

Could I trust him? As soon as I had the thought, I felt guilty. Ben had never once given me reason to believe I couldn't. At the same time, though, I could feel his eyes on me as I watched Bev's lazily circling ceiling fan. He was thinking. He was probably completely overwhelmed at the thought that two of his best friends were flamers. I wished I could get into his head, but I was also eternally grateful that I wasn't able to.

I don't think I'd ever laid so still over the course of that next hour. Slowly, more and more of the sun began filtering through the window, and when Beverly's shrill alarm clock went off at 6 a.m., it rang for a solid fifteen seconds before anyone else even stirred.

"What the fuck is that noise," the lump of blankets with Stan's hair groaned. "Turn it off."

"It's th-the alarm," Bill sighed groggily, sitting up in bed. "It's time for school."

Eddie groaned and rolled over face down into his pillow, putting both of his hands over his ears. "My head hurts," he managed.

Bev sat up with a massive yawn and slapped at the alarm clock on the nightstand until the God forsaken noise stopped. "Rise and shine, everybody," she said, rubbing at her eyes and running a hand through her hair.

I saw Mike blinking the sleep out of his eyes. Ben was sitting up quietly against the wall, very focused on his hands in his lap.

"Eds, up," I said, thumping him with my pillow.

"Fuck off, I'm awake," he growled, turning his face to glare at me. "That light is obscene," he added, wincing and yawning.

He looked *rough*. There were dark purple circles under his eyes, and he was squinting at me like he had a migraine. I wondered if he even remembered anything he'd said to me in the bathroom last night. By the looks of it, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't.

"Eddie Spaghetti, you look hungover," Beverly giggled, climbing over Bill's legs and getting out of her bed.

Stan finally poked his eyes out from under his blankets, leveling a glare at her. "He's not the only one. This is why I said whiskey was a bad idea."

She rolled her eyes at him and nudged me with her toes. "What about you, punk? How do you feel?"

"Delightful," I croaked, which was absolutely not true. Not only was my anxiety eating me, I was more than a little hungover myself. My stomach was rolling, and nothing sounded better than going home and climbing into my bed.

As the other Losers started folding their sleeping bags and sleepily digging through their backpacks for a change of clothes, I noticed just how bad Eddie must be feeling. He was usually full of energy in the mornings, but today he could barely keep his eyes open without holding his head. He was still sitting in the middle of the floor and the back of his grey tee shirt was damp with sweat.

"Hey," I said quietly, touching his hand for a second. "You okay?"

He frowned at me. "My stomach hurts. My head hurts. Everything hurts."

"Do you wanna skip? I'll let you come nap at my house," I said under my breath, my eyes flickering to the others. They were all preoccupied with packing their stuff up.

"I can't skip. My mother would have my neck," he frowned.

"Your mother doesn't have to know," I said, rolling my eyes. "I didn't plan on calling her up."

"Maybe," Eddie conceded, slowly shifting to his knees so that he could roll up his sleeping bag.

"Hey, Stan the Man, do me a favor," I said. Stanley had just come back from the bathroom and was looking rather grumpy and tired for someone so well dressed in khakis.

"What's up?" he yawned.

"Can you drop me and Eds at my house? He's nursing a wicked hangover, so I think we're gonna skip."

Stan looked doubtful. "Finals are like next week, guys."

I batted my eyelashes at him. "Please, Stanny? For me?"

Stanley crinkled his nose. "Ew, don't call me that. Ever. Fine, I'll take you guys home." He turned to the others, who were having an animated discussion over whether they were going to pull a senior prank on our last day. "I'll be back for you guys, alright? I'm taking these delinquents back to Richie's house."

Ben quickly looked away, and I gritted my teeth. He was a sweet kid, but his dumbass expressions were going to give everything away.

The others all but ignored him as the three of us ducked out of the room, and I managed to catch Bev saying, "Mike, where exactly do you propose we get that many chickens?"

—

Once Stan dropped Eddie and I at my place, I waited for him to round the corner and kissed Eddie's forehead. "I'm sorry you don't feel good, lightweight," I said, putting my arm around his waist and leading him into the house and up the stairs to my room.

"I'm not a lightweight," Eddie said sullenly. If he wasn't aggressively bantering with me, he must really feel like shit.

I got him tucked into my bed and sat down next to him as he put both hands over his face to block out the light. "Hey...so do you wanna talk about last night?"

He peeked out at me, looking confused. "About what? How I'm never drinking again?"

I blinked at him. "No Eds, in the bathroom."

"Bathroom," he repeated, looking completely lost. "I don't follow."

Realization dawned on me. He'd been so black out drunk he really

didn't remember. "You propositioned me for sex," I blurted.

"Yeah, okay," Eddie said, rolling his eyes. He started to pull the covers back up over his face in annoyance.

My jaw dropped at the idea that he thought I'd make that up. Then again, it sounded exactly like something I would make up. "Holy shit, I'm telling the truth. You wanted me to fuck you right there on the bathroom floor!" I cried.

Eddie paled when he saw that I was telling the truth. "Oh," he said in a small voice. "I'm sorry about that. Jeez."

I grinned at him. "So, do you really want to have sex with me?"

"Shut the fuck up, Richie," Eddie warned, his cheeks turning a stunning shade of scarlet.

Something stirred low in my stomach. "You want to have sex with me," I repeated in a shell-shocked voice.

"Well no shit, Einstein, I've only been in love with you since I was three feet tall," Eddie snapped, pulling the blanket up over his face in embarrassment.

I couldn't help my smile. "Well shit, kid, I'm speechless," I laughed. Hearing him admit it out loud, sober, was mind blowing.

"That's a first," he mumbled.

I was having such a good time teasing him, there was no way I could bring up Ben right now. What good would it do to get him worked up? Instead, I slid under the covers next to him and nuzzled into his neck. "Sleep, Eds," I murmured, wrapping my arms around him.

"Mm," he sighed, pushing back into my embrace and closing his eyes. "You're a dick, you know that?"

"Mrs. K knows that too," I said solemnly, nipping playfully at his ear.

He groaned in annoyance. "I'm going to break up with you if you keep talking about fucking my mother. That shit's gross."

I snickered, kissing his cheek and settling into my pillow. Never in a million years would I have imagined that Eddie Kaspbrak would have me so firmly wrapped around his smaller than average finger, but here we were. And I never wanted it to end.

Eddie's POV:

We ended up only napping an hour or two, but I felt a million times better when I woke up I dressed in the clothes I had planned on wearing to school that day so that when I went home my mom wouldn't suspect anything. Richie put a game in his PlayStation, and I leaned against his shoulder while he cursed at the screen every time an enemy got a hit in on him. I thought back to the dozens of times I'd sat next to him on this bed while we played video games. Atari first, then when PlayStation came out, he hadn't eaten lunch at school for the entirety of sophomore year so that he could buy that as well. I thought about all the times I'd watched him squint in concentration and cuss out the characters on the television, and how I'd pretended to be annoyed. I'd secretly loved getting to spend the one on one time with him.

He saw me staring at him and reminiscing, and he paused the game. "Take a picture, it'll last longer," he said, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. "You need a haircut," he added, twirling the hair that was starting to curl at the base of my neck around his finger.

I grunted, shrugging him off. "I have one scheduled a few days before graduation." I could feel him looking at me, now, and I turned to him. "Take a picture, it'll last longer," I teased, but stopped when I saw his face. He looked sad. Solemn.

"We're down to three weeks," he said quietly. His face was pale.

"I know," I sighed. I knew immediately what he was talking about, and it made me sick to think about it. Three weeks left with the love of my life, and then what? I was going to Ohio to become a pharmacist. And I had no idea when or if I'd be able to see him again.

"I hope you know how much I love you," he said sincerely, kissing my

forehead. "I've loved you since we were kids. No matter what happens, I'm going to love you, Eds."

"Don't be gay," I said, my eyes stinging. I wiped at them quickly, hoping he wouldn't notice. "I promise we'll stay in contact, Richie. I promise."

"Move away with me," Richie said suddenly. My heart stopped in my chest at his words.

"What do you mean?" I asked softly.

"You're 18. I'm almost 19. We're adults. Run away with me. We can move to California. We'll get you into a pharmacy school, I'll find work at comedy clubs or something. They're more open minded there, Eddie, we wouldn't have to hide." He'd started talking more quickly at the prospect, his eyes shining.

I couldn't describe how perfect it sounded. Waking up every morning to his freckled face, being able to walk down the street holding his hand. Listening to his stupid jokes from the front row of a theater once he got his big break, because I knew he would. Richie's personality was too big for a small town like Derry, but somewhere like California...damn. They would eat that shit up. In the back of my mind, though, there was still a nagging, festering thought that stopped me. My mom.

"Mom wouldn't make it without me," I said quietly. It hurt me to say, because his idea sounded so perfect. "She needs me, Richie. And I need her."

Pain flashed across Richie's face, but he hid it quickly. "Think about it," he whispered, his eyes pleading.

I couldn't bear to hurt him right now. "Of course," I said, leaning forward to kiss him.

The urgency in this kiss was palpable; I could taste it. It was the urgency of a love that was running out of time. It quickly became more heated, and Richie's tongue slid against the tip of mine ever so slightly as he deepened the kiss and wrapped his fingers in my hair. I

shivered, parting my lips compliantly and tracing gently up and down his spine.

After a few minutes he pulled away and shifted his weight, looking embarrassed. "Sorry," he said, trying to inconspicuously adjust his comforter so that it covered the obvious bulge in the front of his sweatpants. "Trying not to ruin the moment."

I don't know why I did what I did, but I pulled the comforter away.

Richie's eyes were shocked at first, but when he saw where my gaze was planted, his entire body language changed. His eyes were dark with lust as he slowly adjusted the spot where his pants were tented, his hand lingering there for a minute as he made eye contact with me, and he raised his arms silently as I began frantically tugging at his shirt to free some of his skin.

He responded by quickly attempting to unbutton my shirt, his fingers slipping as his hands shook.

I helped him along with it and met his eyes. "I want this," I said firmly, surprised at my own confidence. "I want you."

Richie didn't argue. Instead, he nodded once and kissed me again, so intensely it made my head spin. "I want you too," he whispered against my lips, nipping at my jaw and neck teasingly.

"Richie," I gasped out, obligingly moving my thighs apart as he nudged his knee between them.

He peppered kisses along my throat as his trembling hands fumbled at my jeans button. "Are you sure you're ready?" He whispered. His voice was hoarse, soft.

I nodded, crushing my mouth to his and helping him with the button, and he pulled my jeans down over my hips. I wriggled them down the rest of the way and tossed them aside. This left me in my briefs, and Richie swallowed hard before gently trailing his fingers down to the front of my underwear and tentatively holding his hand there.

I couldn't help the soft moan that left my lips, and I watched goose bumps crop up on Richie's skin as he took my own hand and pressed

it to the front of his sweats.

I instantly turned red as Richie tilted his head back at my touch, biting his lip. He raised his hips slightly into my touch. "I love you, Eddie," he managed. "I want you. Fuck."

"I want you," I replied immediately, shocked at the confidence in my voice.

He pushed me gently backwards onto his bed, and the heat that flowed to my groin when he took his sweatpants off was almost too much to handle. I hadn't seen Richie in his underwear since we were kids. Now, as he loomed over me in his blue plaid boxers, I wanted nothing more than to see what they hid.

Richie hesitated for only a second before he hooked his index fingers into the waistband of my underwear and pulled them down over my thighs.

Heat flooded my cheeks and I turned my face away, but Richie stopped me, cupping my cheek in his trembling hand. "You stop that," he breathed, his glasses sliding down his nose as he looked down at me. "You're fucking stunning, Eddie. You're perfect."

I knew I was shaking like a leaf, but I met his eyes. "Take yours off," I whispered.

Suddenly extremely self-conscious, he turned pink. He slowly slid his boxers down, inch by inch, and kicked them off of his ankles.

I didn't think I was going to last 30 more seconds.

I grabbed him around the neck and pulled him down to me, and the nerve endings that were set alight when our bare skin touched for the first time made both of us gasp. I buried my face in his neck, embarrassed, breathing in his familiar comforting smell.

I felt him situate his pelvic bone against mine as he balanced his weight on one arm to push his glasses up again.

"Just take them off," I murmured, kissing the tip of his nose.

"Absolutely not," he whispered back, kissing up and down my neck so urgently it made my head spin. "I want to be able to see you. Here. Now. Like this." He held me closer to him, and I closed my eyes and raised my hips slowly to press more firmly to his.

"I love you so much," he whispered, suddenly pulling back and pressing his lips to my chest. I fisted my hands in the sheets as his kisses lowered, down my chest and stomach, before he stopped at my bellybutton.

"I—I don't one hundred percent know what I'm doing," he admitted, wrapping his arms around my thighs and looking up at me sheepishly from between my legs.

I squirmed, biting my lip hard. "I don't either, I don't care," I hissed out, my toes curling as I silently begged him to quit teasing me like this.

"Listen, if something doesn't feel good, or if I hurt you, I want you to tell me," he insisted in a gruff voice, sounding insecure.

"I will," I said, swallowing hard.

"Promise."

"Fuck, Richie, I promise," I groaned, curling my fingers into his hair.

His eyes were solemn, and I could tell he was nervous, but he gave me his familiar cocky smirk as he kissed the inside of my thigh once and finally lowered his head.

And at that moment, my world dissolved into nothing but Richie.

—

The sun was hanging low when I woke up in Richie's arms after our nap. Instantly, memories of earlier came flooding back and I felt my cheeks get hot. I propped myself up on my elbow to get a better look at him. He was still passed out, his mouth slightly open. I gingerly climbed over him and stood up. I felt stiff and sore and honestly pretty unhygienic, but I felt good. It hadn't been perfect. Hell, he'd been embarrassed because he hadn't lasted as long as he'd wanted,

and I'd been embarrassed because I'd cried, but it had all ended okay. I began tiptoeing around our piles of clothes towards the bathroom when I heard a soft content sigh from the bed.

"Where do you think you're going, good looking?" Richie yawned. I could hear the smile in his voice.

I turned to face him, reaching for the first article of clothing I could find to cover myself. "Had to piss," I said, realizing I was holding Richie's tee shirt against my junk.

"Mm, don't be long," Richie said, stretching and reaching blindly for his glasses on the nightstand. His tired smile spread wider once he could truly see again. "I love you, you fucking dork."

"I love you too," I grinned, backing into the bathroom so I didn't expose my ass and shutting the door. I looked at my face in the mirror. Did I look any different?

Eddie Kaspbrak was not a virgin anymore.

I couldn't help smiling at that thought. My mom had had control over every aspect of my life from the time I was born. She'd decided what I ate, how I dressed, and for a while she even tried to control who I hung out with. But this was one thing I had utter control over. I'd decided that I was going to lose my virginity to my childhood best friend and there was not a damn thing she could do to make me take it back.

I quickly used the restroom and splashed some water on my face, then picked Richie's shirt back up and put it on. It hung down halfway over my thighs, giving me some semblance of modesty.

When I entered the bedroom, however, Richie wasn't there.

I furrowed my brow, peeking warily around the corner in case he was attempting to scare me. I heard him coming up the stairs at that moment, and it sounded like he was talking to somebody. Trying to calm them down, more accurately.

I ducked back into the bathroom, terrified his dad had come home from the bar early and was going to find me here, half naked in his

son's clothes.

"Yeah, Mrs. K, he's right here," I heard him sigh outside the bathroom door, and he knocked quickly before pulling the door open on me. He was fully dressed, and he was holding the phone out to me.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

It hit me then that my mom had been expecting me home right after school for a routine doctor's appointment. When I hadn't shown, I could only imagine the panic she'd gone through.

I took the phone with a wince and held it to my ear. "Hi, mamma."

"Edward Kaspbrak!" It sounded like she was in tears. "I was so worried about you! I called your other friends' houses, no one knew where you were! I called the school, I called the hospital. And I found out you skipped out on me to be with Richie *Tozier*." She sneered his name like it left a bad taste in her mouth.

"We watched a movie and lost track of time, mom, I'm sorry," I sighed, giving Richie a look. I'd expected him to waggle his eyebrows at me or make a snide remark, but he was only watching me worriedly. He knew how my mom could be.

"I had to call and cancel your appointment with Dr. Mace, and God knows if we'll be able to get in again before we have to move. You have to have your back checked every six months, Eddie, you know this! I don't want your scoliosis to get worse, do you understand me? You're a fragile boy!"

"I'm not fragile, mom," I said, leaning into Richie's outstretched arms.

"You don't know anything about your health, Eddie! How are you going to survive in the real world if you can't even keep track of your doctor's appointments?"

I took a deep breath, trying not to get pissed off. She was not going to ruin today for me. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"I want you home right now, before dark. Are you listening, Eddie?"

"I hear you, mom."

"Good." She sniffled on the other end of the line. "I love you, Eddie Bear."

"I love you too, mamma," I sighed.

"I'll see you soon, honey. Goodbye." She hung up.

"Sorry about that," Richie winced, squeezing me to him. I relaxed into his embrace, breathing in his comforting smell. "She read me the riot act as soon as I answered the phone. I shouldn't have let us fall asleep."

"You didn't know," I said, leaning up for a kiss expectantly and pushing my lips out.

Richie smiled at me, leaning down to comply. His soft mouth against mine brought back memories from earlier that day, and I pulled back with a blush. "We had sex," I blurted.

He laughed, looking a little embarrassed himself. "We did."

"It was...really good," I admitted. "I mean, I think it was. I don't have anything to gauge it off of."

"I thought it was really good too," Richie grinned. "Almost as good as with your mother."

I shoved him and rolled my eyes. "Way to ruin it, asshole. What did I say earlier?" I couldn't help but smiling at his dopey grin though.

"I can't believe you're mine," Richie said suddenly, looking extremely serious. "Like fuck, Eddie. I've grown up with this stupid ass crush on you and to think I could've had you for myself before now if I'd just grown a pair and told you."

I smiled gently at him. "Let's not think about 'what ifs', okay? You have me now."

"I have you for three more weeks," Richie sighed. He looked forlorn.

"Richie," I said, looking him dead in the eyes. "That's bullshit. You're going to hold my heart forever. No matter what happens. I promise."

He took my hand in his own and smiled sadly at me. "I'm gonna hold you to that, Kaspbrak. Because you have mine too."